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# TAMBOURINE TRUMPET AND DRUM

*By*

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH



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TAMBOURINE, TRUMPET AND DRUM

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TAMBOURINE, TRUMPET AND DRUM



## PART ONE

### TAMBOURINE

*“Will you kindly put a shilling in my little tambourine  
For a gentleman in khaki ordered south?”*—RUDYARD KIPLING.

#### I

A SOUTH-WEST wind was blowing over Marlingate, puffing down from Cuckoo Hill to carry the smoke of the Old Town up as far as Mount Idle, rushing in more gustily from the sea, so that even New Marlingate in its genteel seclusion behind the Town Park caught the reek of fish and fishing nets from the shore.

Three young women were battling along the Marine Parade, clutching at their straw boater hats which threatened every minute to sail away in spite of the pins that anchored them to banks of hair.

“I nearly lost mine then,” cried the youngest, whose yellow fringe was streaming over her eyes.

“Well, don’t forget about your skirt,” said her eldest sister; “there’s a man coming.”

“What does he matter? I’ve only got two hands, and my skirt won’t blow off, but my hat will if I don’t hold on to it.”

She clutched resolutely at her head as the man passed, her eyes laughing like blue water through the golden reeds of her hair, while her skirts whipped and whirled above her frothy white petticoat and little buttoned boots.

“Really, Kitty, you’re shameless,” said the eldest girl. “No nice man will look at you if you do that sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?” asked Kitty innocently. “I’m just walking along, the same as you are.”

Her sister made no reply, and the girl in the middle said:

“Oughtn’t we to be going home now? It’s after twelve.”

“Well, there’s plenty of time. The ‘bus doesn’t start till half-past. Let’s walk back as far as the Library. We might meet Violet Faircloth.”

"We'll be seeing quite enough of her this evening," said the youngest girl.

"Not more than we'll see of the others and I never can get a chance of talking to her during rehearsals."

"What do you want to talk to her about? You meet her practically every day."

"She's my friend," said her sister loftily.

"Oh, well! . . ."

Kitty shrugged and smiled, as one dismissing a silly situation from her thoughts. She was very young, small, dimpled and alluring, the only one of the three to whom the wind had added beauty. The other two wore its flush unbecomingly on their noses, and they looked very much older—darker, heavier, more developed. Georgina, the middle sister, was almost plain, in a lumpish way accentuated by her clothes. But Sibylla the eldest was handsome enough (apart from the disorder brought about in her circulation by the wind), with a ripened figure that contrasted strangely with the wistful immaturity of her face.

They had turned about and were walking now with their backs to the wind, which flapped their skirts ahead of them. The parade was almost deserted, most of the inhabitants of Marlingate who were out on such a boisterous day preferring the shelter of the shopping arcade on the other side of the road.

"Let's cross over," said Sibylla. "I really think I've had enough of this."

"I can't think why we came here at all," said Kitty; "it's much nicer in the town."

"Or in the country," said Georgina; "this would have been just the right morning for a walk to Old Rumble or Harold's Plat."

"Speak for yourself," said Kitty. "I hate them both."

A wave thumped against the parade, rose in a sudden high tower and then hurled itself into the wind in a million salt, tingling drops. The girls squealed, picked up their skirts and ran, arriving on the safe shore of the Marine Arcade with hats askew, boas flying and spattered jackets.

"Oh, dear," sighed Kitty, "it's salt water; it'll leave a mark."

"I can't think why you put on your blue today," said Georgina. "You might have known it would get spoilt."

"If I'd known it would be like this, I shouldn't have—we haven't met a soul."

The two elder sisters glanced meaningly at each other as they went all three into Bond's Library. Kitty looked round her, evidently in some hope, then gave a shrug and a sigh. The Library was apparently as bereft of souls as the Parade.

With bodies it was sufficiently crowded. A number of ladies, some of whom wore mackintosh capes, were searching the shelves for the entertainment of a probably wet afternoon. Sibylla went up to one of them.

"Hullo, Violet," she said. "I thought I should find you here."

The girl, who of all the company was most unlike a violet—being tall, stout and fair, with a hearty, pushful manner—turned round, a book in her hand.

"Oh, hullo, Sib—how are you? hullo, Georgie, hullo, Kitty. You're coming to the rehearsal this evening?"

"Of course I am," said Kitty, with a pin in her voice—after all, as she was the chief performer, nothing very serious could be done without her.

"We're all coming," said Sibylla, "but I don't know my words yet."

"I gather that Mr. Foddington is taking us mainly for the music. After all, it's the most important part of an opera."

"It's the most difficult to practise," said Sibylla, "especially with two performers in the same house. Kitty's never away from the piano."

"Well, I've the most to learn."

"Yes, you don't let us forget you've got the best part, do you?" snapped Georgina. "And as for there being two performers in the house, I thought there were three."

"Mr. Foddington's going to have some rehearsals specially for the chorus," said Violet.

Kitty began to hum, "Twenty lovesick maidens, we . . ."

"Do you know," said Sibylla, "that old Mr. Grisewood—the one who does occasional duty at All Hallows—thinks we've been very rash to choose *Patience* for our theatricals? He said that if we wanted to do Gilbert and Sullivan, we'd much better have chosen *The Sorcerer* or *Trial by Jury*. He thinks *Patience* is too ambitious."

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," said Violet bluffly, "and I wish you wouldn't call it theatricals, Sib; it sounds so drawing-roomy and amateurish. After all, we're hiring the Concert Hall."

"Have you got that fixed?"

"Yes—at least for two nights in the last half of February. I don't think they've quite settled which."

"The war may be over by then," said Kitty.

"I don't suppose it will, for a moment; and even if it is, there's sure to be a lot of wounded soldiers and widows and orphans who'll need the money."

"Father says the war will be over by Christmas," said Sibylla.

"Well, if it is we can't do anything about it. We shan't be ready to give our performance till next year. Mr. Foddington wants to fix on the last possible date before Lent begins."

Georgina groaned.

"How sick we shall be of it all by then!"

"I don't think *you've* got anything to complain of," said Violet. "Think of me—with rehearsals in our drawing-room every week."

"I wish we could have them in ours," said Sibylla. "I wish it was big enough."

"We'll have to take a room in the Marine Hotel later on, when we've got the full choruses working. . . . But oh, girls, do you know what time it is? It's twenty past twelve and the 'bus goes at the half-hour."

"Oh, heavens! we'd better run. Have you chosen your book?"

Violet glanced at the novel she still held in her hand.

"I don't know—I was just looking at this one; it's by a woman I've never heard of before—May Sinclair."

"Well, if it looks nice you'd better keep it. There isn't time to choose another."

"I doubt if Mother will think it 'nice'—seems a bit improper at a first glance."

"Then you'd better put it back," said Sibylla hastily.

"Not I," said Violet, tucking it under her arm. "Mother won't bother to look at it if I don't leave it lying about; and when I've finished it I'll pass it on to you."

"Thanks; but I don't care to read improper books."

"Then Kitty can have it. You won't say no, will you, Kit? And now for heaven's sake let's hurry or we'll have to walk all the way home."

At the bottom of High Street the 'bus was waiting—the 'bus which made it possible for the residents of New Marlingate to enjoy the

sea-air and the shops on the Marine Parade without the toil of walking through the less elegant parts of the town.

It was perhaps a pity that the residential quarter should be so far from the sea; but it had been impossible to develop the town in any other direction, because of flanking hills; All Holland Hill to the east and Cuckoo Hill to the west, these two squeezed into the valley between them the fishing-town that had been the only Marlingate until fifty years ago. Over it hung almost continually a mist woven of spray and chimney-smoke through which the old red roofs glowed dully like a smothered bonfire.

Fifty years ago some grandiose municipal scheme had started building at both ends of the town. At the sea end the old town-wall had given place to the banalities of a parade and a pier and a Marine Hotel. At the shore end a rather confused lay-out of squares, crescents and groves spread northward to the woods that shut out the Sussex weald.

The borough fathers had been well aware of the difficulties thus created for those new residents whom their scheme was to attract to the place. The Marlingate Omnibus Company was a municipal concern and ran a half-hourly service from the bottom of High Street to the Totty Lands, on the extreme northward fringe of the new town. A return ticket for the whole trip cost only threepence and the service was very well patronized, even more today than at its inauguration, for there was little doubt that Marlingate, after a short time of prosperity, was now on the downward grade, with very few carriage-folk in the district north of the Town Park..

The 'bus was drawn by two horses as far as the Town Hall, where a third waited to be hitched on for the rest of the way, which grew increasingly steep as the town climbed out of its valley towards the woods. The conductor had just taken the mackintosh covers off the horses' backs and the driver was gathering up the reins as the four young women climbed in, their skirts muddy and their hats on one side. The 'bus smelled strongly of horses and wet mackintoshes and seemed at first to be quite full, but slowly and unwillingly the occupants shuffled closer to each other and all the newcomers were able to find seats. A small girl, with her nose pressed against the window behind the driver, turned round and her funny, pale little face broke into smiles of greeting.

"Hullo," said Kitty, who was seated close to the door beside Sibylla, "there's the kid."

"For heaven's sake, Kitty, don't talk like that in front of people"—Sibylla's whisper was almost as audible as Kitty's remark—"it's dreadfully vulgar."

"What do you mean?"

"'Kid'—you know it's vulgar to call her that."

"Oh, Sib, I don't; and nor would you if you were more awake. Everyone uses the word now."

Sibylla looked away from her, aware of her own flush, and when at the Town Hall a passenger dismounted she moved into his empty place, which was next to the little girl.

"Hullo, Myra."

"Hullo, Sibylla—look what I've bought."

She pointed to the lapel of her jacket, on which was pinned a small medallion photograph, the size and the price of a penny.

"What's that?"

"It's a photograph of General Buller. Don't you see?"

"Yes, of course—so it is. I haven't seen any like that before."

"They've got dozens in Budgen's shop—Roberts and Gatacre and Baden-Powell. . . . I mean to buy one every week with my Saturday's penny."

"I've got one too, Miss Sibylla," said a pretty round-faced young woman who was sitting opposite the little girl. "I chose General French."

"So you have, Rose. How very nice!"

"Why don't you buy one?" asked the little girl. "You could afford the whole set with all that money you've got."

"Sssh, Myra! . . . don't talk so loud. And I haven't got 'all that money,' as you call it. When you're old enough to have a dress allowance you'll soon find that twenty-five pounds a year doesn't go very far. You've nothing to spend your pocket-money on but yourself—when you have to buy your own clothes and stamps and 'bus tickets . . .'"

She broke off, aware of a certain confusion in what she was saying. Myra was aware of it too and also kept silence. As they sat like that, silently, side by side, it was easy to see that they were sisters. They had the same heavy dark hair, and the same dark brows and grey eyes that looked dark under their shadow. But Myra had nothing—and

probably would have nothing—of her sister's richness of outline. She was a skinny little creature with long black legs and shoulders that hunched and wriggled under her reefer jacket. Now she was squirming around to see the third horse being hitched on. Which were they having today—bay Charley or grey Mabel or that long thin roan which Myra did not like because Kitty had once said that it looked as if it might split in half if it pulled too hard and let the boy who rode it fall through the middle? She knew that was only a joke, but she could not shake off the fear that it might really happen some day.

However, today the third horse was not the thin one and they drove without mishap as far as the French Gun Inn, which stood opposite the Town Park and marked the end of the penny stage. Here all the sisters and the nurse-girl Rose got out, for it was only a few yards up the hill to their house in Monypenny Crescent. Violet Faircloth had paid an extra penny to ride as far as the entrance to Pelham Square, which was a little way farther on. She had forty pounds a year for her allowance, so could be reckless over 'bus fares.

The gaps between the ages of the four sisters proclaimed the empty spaces in their parents' married life. Sibylla had been born in India a year after her mother's arrival as the bride of Captain Landless of the Seventieth Foot. When the little girl was only two years old she had thought it her duty to take her back to England, to better conditions of climate and education, and had stayed with her there till, at six, she was considered old enough to go to school. She had then returned to her husband, and Georgina had been born, also in her turn to travel five thousand miles in quest of the moist south-west wind and the integrity of English servants. Kitty had been born in England, when Major Landless was on leave; and Myra had been born actually after his retirement, when he had settled down as Colonel Landless to enjoy family life for the first time since his marriage.

Sibylla could remember how shocked she had felt at the birth of her youngest sister. She had been away at school when Kitty was born, and Georgina had been a far-off legend, materialising somewhat disappointingly a few years later at Tilbury Docks. But nothing had been hid from her of Myra's gradual intrusion into a world which already seemed too full of women.

Kitty and Georgie were safe behind the purdah of boarding-school, but twenty-year-old Sibylla—outraged, blushing, stumbling among

distorted rays of semi-enlightenment—was at home to wait on her mother and take charge of those household duties she had been forced to relinquish, to watch her thickening waist and increasing discomfort, without a word said openly until the end, when a monthly nurse arrived and it was all taken for granted.

Colonel Landless was disappointed that the baby was not a boy, but as he had endured this disappointment three times already it was now tempered by a certain degree of philosophy.

“Well, I daresay she’ll grow up the flower of the flock. Isn’t there some sort of a proverb about ‘the autumn child that brings the blessing to the house?’”

Sibylla said grimly:

“Myra was born in June.”

“I mean the autumn of her parents’ lives, of course. Both her mother and I are getting on. But she’s a fine, sturdy little thing. Doctor Harrison says he never saw so healthy a child.”

He seemed pleased to the point of excitement, and Sibylla looked away, feeling almost ashamed of him. But as the little girl grew older she became very fond of her. The years between them seemed to bring them closer to each other. The fact that she was old enough to be Myra’s mother gave her a feeling for her which she had never had for Georgie or Kitty, whose ages could make them nothing but very-much-younger sisters. She loved to play with her, to read to her, to take care of her—to fill, in fact, the place of her real mother, who had started a period of ill-health soon after her birth and left her very much to the care of servants.

The house in Monypenny Crescent was not a large one, and when Myra was seven years old her nursery was given up and she was promoted to the schoolroom, now deserted by her sisters in charge of a nurse-housemaid. Sibylla had taught her her letters, but at the end of a year her parents—doubtful, perhaps, of their eldest daughter’s ability to teach her more—decided to send her to Highfield House.

This establishment—describing itself as “a School for the Daughters of Gentlemen”—had been one of their reasons for settling in Marlington. It had a good reputation as a day-school for girls, providing them with a sound education on modern lines, while avoiding any new-fangled nonsense which might tend to make them unmarriageable—Cheltenham and water. For the first year, till after the new baby was born, Georgina and Kitty had been kept at their boarding-

school in Lymington; but when Myra's birth released the house from taboos, they were brought home and sent more economically to day-school.

Kitty was still there when Myra's school-days began—a girl of seventeen in her last year. Sibylla would never forget the heaviness of her heart when she saw them setting out together for the first time, Myra clutching tightly at her sister's hand and looking up into her face with a queer little eager look of fright and adoration. For in spite of all Sibylla's love and service, it was the sad truth that Myra had always loved Kitty best—Kitty who did so little for her, who so seldom read to her or took her out for walks, but who was always so pretty and soft and fair and full of fun, so unlike her eldest sister. And now those two would be together in a world from which Sibylla was shut out—Myra, now she went to school, would probably not care any more to be read to or to go for walks with a grown-up person. Sibylla turned bitterly from the door.

She had never greatly cared for her other two sisters. They had not grown up together, nor was it only the years that divided them. As a child Sibylla had been alone in such nurseries as her unfixed life provided, and by the time her mother brought Georgina to England she had already been two years at a boarding-school. Kitty when she arrived was only "the baby" to her ten-year-old sister, a child in the nursery, first a bore and then a plague.

Now that they were all grown up she could not love them any better. They had so little in common that sometimes they felt like strangers.

Georgina she often found depressing. She was the only one of the three who was plain and seemed to have no outside interests. At school she had enjoyed a certain reputation as a tom-boy—that popular character in the storybooks of the day. But unlike the heroines of school-fiction she had not triumphantly emerged from her chrysalis as a beautiful butterfly. Indeed, when she put up her hair and "came out" at the Marlingate Christmas Ball, she seemed to retire rather than to emerge and settle down steadily into dullness—the only Landless girl who was unattractive and couldn't find partners at a ball.

Sibylla had no feelings of triumph over Georgina. Even though she was better looking and seldom lacked partners for more than two dances, the fact remained that she was six years older than her sister and still unmarried. To be unmarried at twenty-nine was a dis-

advantage which no advantages in looks or talents could outweigh. It is true that neither was Georgie likely to be married at twenty-nine. But that did not at the moment destroy her youth or the hopes with which it mocked Sibylla's fear of her next birthday.

Kitty was in this respect even more disturbing, for though the youngest of the three, she would almost certainly be the first married. She had already had four proposals, whereas Georgina had had none and Sibylla only one and that from somebody quite impossible. Kitty would have regarded any ball as a disaster if she had not at least six names scrawled on the back of her programme in hopes of any extra dances that could be coaxed or bribed out of the band. Men would turn round and gaze at her as she walked into a room—they would turn round and gaze at her as she walked on the Marine Parade; and their gaze did not meet her averted face or downcast eyes. Sibylla disapproved of Kitty. If Georgie discouraged her, Kitty disgusted her—she thought her "fast," shameless, irreligious; it was terrible to see her going about capturing everybody's love and admiration, even the innocent Myra's.

Frustrated in her hopes of companionship at home, Sibylla looked outside and released her disappointed affections on Violet Faircloth. They had been friends ever since the Landless family's arrival in Marlingate, where the Faircloths had already been established several years; and as one by one her sisters repulsed, outraged or forsook her, Violet had seemed to grow more attractive, more estimable, more faithful. To the outer world she did not appear as a young woman of more than average graces, but she filled a very sore gap in Sibylla's life and at the same time never disquieted her with any superiorities save of income, which Sibylla did not really mind about. Violet was rich, but she was also twenty-nine and unmarried and had not had even one proposal. Mrs. Landless said it was because the men thought Violet "emancipated," and congratulated herself that none of her daughters could reasonably be avoided on that score.

Every evening the Landless family sat down to dinner at half-past seven. The Colonel sat at the head of the table in his well-worn but also well-brushed evening suit, which had once been his best but now was kept exclusively for wear at home. His wife and daughters were also in evening dress, Mrs. Landless wearing a grey *brochée* silk, with a fichu, the girls displaying their arms and throats in the dance frocks

of a year ago. It would have been a couple of years ago but for the fact that they were going out after dinner tonight—to a rehearsal of *Patience* in Mrs. Faircloth's drawing-room. Sibylla wore *eau-de-nil* satin, which suited her; Georgina wore pale blue silk, which did not; Kitty was in the gown with which she had enchanted the young men of Marlingate at her coming-out ball—a creamy muslin seeded over with pearls and frilled with *bébé* ribbon. There was a knot of *bébé* ribbon and some rose-buds in her hair. Sibylla thought it was too much for such an occasion.

Myra did not, of course, come down to dinner, and her bedtime had released Rose, who stood against the wall beside Crofton the parlourmaid, both looking very stiff and starched in their black-and-white uniforms and flowing cap-streamers. They handed round the soup which Mrs. Landless served from the tureen and the slices of mutton which she carved—the Colonel was too well-used to being waited on by native servants to be able to do any serving or carving—and finally helpings of cornflour shape and stewed pears. The table was covered with a heavy white damask cloth and a great deal of glass and silver which glittered in the light of four gas-globes hanging in a heavy chandelier from the middle of the ceiling. Both Colonel and Mrs. Landless drank claret, but the girls had only water till the end of the meal, when a decanter of Marsala was put on the table and the servants withdrew.

"What time have you to be at Mrs. Faircloth's?" asked the Colonel.  
Kitty replied.

"As soon after quarter-past eight as we can manage. Mr. Foddington wants to go through all the solo parts."

"It really surprises me," said Mrs. Landless, "that Mrs. Faircloth should choose such a time for the rehearsal. I don't at all like the idea of you girls going out like this after dinner. Surely she could have let you have her drawing-room in the afternoon?"

"It's nothing to do with the drawing-room," said Sibylla irritably. "I've told you before, Mother; it's because of the men. They can't manage any time except the evenings."

"They could manage Saturday afternoon, could they not? So there's no need for you to talk like that, dear."

"We shouldn't get any men at all if they had to turn up on Saturday afternoons," said Kitty. "It's the only time they have for bicycling

or playing golf. The evenings suit everybody best and it's nice to have somewhere to go after dinner."

"I take it that you aren't going by yourselves?" said the Colonel. "Your mother is sending one of the servants with you?"

"Yes, Rose is coming with us to Pelham Square, which after all isn't at the other end of the town."

Kitty often spoke unrebuked to her parents in a way they would not have tolerated from either of the others.

"And is she fetching you home?"

"No, Father. Geoffrey Morison said he'd walk back with us."

"That's all right, then. I don't mind your going out at night if you're suitably accompanied; but it's neither proper nor safe for girls of your age to go out in the dark alone."

"Then what about Rose? She's only a year older than I am."

"Rose is quite different," said Mrs. Landless firmly. "Don't be silly, dear."

Colonel Landless changed the subject.

"I heard a shocking thing at the Club this evening. You know that chap Metcalf—the one who lost his wife a year ago and lives in Becket Grove? Well, he's a pro-Boer."

The table blew into a shrill racket of indignation.

"How extraordinary!" . . . "How awful!" . . . "Don't say awful, dear—it's slang." . . . "What a shameful thing to happen in Marlborough! It's bound to bring discredit on us all." . . . "Thank goodness we never called on them."

"I don't suppose he'll dare show himself in the town once it gets generally known," said the Colonel comfortably. "They say that even now he keeps his front window-shutters closed all day."

"I didn't know the houses in Becket Grove had shutters," said Mrs. Landless, whose function it always was to reduce any matter of larger interest to some small dispute on detail.

"Well, his has. Anyway I hope it has, for his sake."

"I don't," said Sibylla, her pale skin mantling with a patriotic flush. "I hope the fishermen come and break all his windows."

"Yes, I must say I do too. Never heard of such a dreadful thing."

"I can't understand how anybody can be a pro-Boer," said Georgie solemnly. "Everyone knows that the Boers are murderers and use dum-dum bullets."

"Well, there *are* pro-Boers. There's that authoress woman whose books you used to like so much. What's her name?—Edna Lyall."

"I shan't read anything of hers again," said Sibylla.

"Nor shall I," said Georgie.

"I can't stand her books at any price," said Kitty, "so I can promise too."

"Girls," said Mrs. Landless. "It's ten past eight. You really ought to start. What are you putting on over your dresses?"

"We thought our golf-capes and fascinators."

"Yes, that will do. And you'll walk there in your outdoor shoes, of course. Georgie, have you found your shoe-bag?"

"Yes, Mother. It was at the back of my drawer."

"Your drawer must have been very untidy. When will you girls learn to keep your drawers tidy?"

Nobody answered her, for Colonel Landless was standing up and pushing back his chair.

"For what we have received . . ." he mumbled, and a minute later his daughters had fluttered out of the room, like butterflies escaping from a box.

The sky was silky with moonlight as the three girls and their young escort walked up the hill to Pelham Square. Below them the town was a dim scatter of lights, which seemed also to spill over the sea, as the fishing-fleet bobbed beside the moon's path from Rock-a-Nore. A distant strum of music came from the town—doubtless some organ-grinder playing outside one of the taverns in Fish Street. The storm had passed, leaving a swept sky and a rinsed air, in which every light and sound seemed to sparkle and ring.

But the new town north of the Park was dark and quiet enough. The gas globes hung like dim fruit from among the trees that drooped over them, leaving the main illumination to the moon. Now and then a cat slid from a garden wall or a piano tinkled faintly from a dark house; but the whole place wore an enclosed, shuttered air, as if to proclaim that well-trained maidservants had long ago "shut up" the well-run houses of well-bred ladies and gentlemen.

The houses of Pelham Square were the largest in the town and inhabited by its wealthiest people. These were not now so numerous as they used to be twenty or even ten years ago, and some of the houses stood empty, while others were occupied by undesirable in-

truders from the manufacturing districts of Kent or even from among the retired tradesmen of Marlingate itself. This was considered most deplorable by everyone except the intruders themselves, and the aborigines had acquired an elaborate technique of ignoring their existence.

Mrs. Faircloth was a widow with ample means, two sons and three daughters—all of whom except Violet were married and settled in other parts of the country. Her house was one of the most imposing in the Square, and the drawing-room occupied the whole of the first floor. From it twin streams of light and music flowed to meet the Landless girls as they followed Wenham, Mrs. Faircloth's highly superior parlourmaid, up the stairs.

*"Twenty lovesick maidens, we—  
Lovesick all against our will . . ."*

"We're late," whispered Sibylla. "They've started."

The room seemed full of bright, pretty dresses, with the dark suits of the men among them like foliage among flowers.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry . . ."

Kitty ran up to her hostess with apologies, while Sibylla and Georgina still lingered in the doorway, fumbling for excuses.

"Oh, don't apologise, my dear. We've begun early, because Mr. Foddington wants to run through as much of the play as possible tonight."

Mrs. Faircloth was a stout, pompous woman who did not normally trouble to put people at their ease; but Kitty's pretty face and manner had won her privileges here as well as at home.

"Is he taking the choruses? I thought it was to be only the solo parts."

"He's taking the ladies' choruses. The men's will have to wait till we've got a room at the Marine Hotel."

Her words laid bare a sore in Marlingate society. It had been easy enough to find twenty well-born girls for the chorus of lovesick maidens, but for the chorus of dragoons it had been necessary to draw from the town's underworld of bank-clerks and tradesmen's sons, such as could never, in any possible circumstances, be admitted to Mrs. Faircloth's drawing-room. The solo parts luckily were few enough to be filled by young men whom no Marlingate mother could forbid her daughter to meet.

One of these came up to Sibylla as she stood by the door.

"Good evening, Miss Landless."

"Oh! . . . Mr. Janaway." He shook hands with her and Georgie. "So you've decided to come after all?"

"If they can put up with me as Grosvenor, I don't mind having a shot at the part. But I'm not used to acting and I can't help feeling I shall make a fool of myself."

"You sing beautifully—I've heard you."

"I'm fond of singing, but I doubt if I can act."

"I doubt if any of us can act—really. Our friends will come to the performance for the singing—and to help the Fund, of course."

"Yes, of course."

"It's delightful music, don't you think?"

"Yes, charming."

"Have you ever seen the opera done professionally?"

"Yes; I saw it at the Savoy a few years ago."

"I've never seen it at all. It's a pity, because I'm sure it would have been a help to me now."

"What part are you playing?"

"The Lady Saphir."

"That's a very nice part—important without being too long to learn easily."

"I know I shall be terribly nervous."

"Oh, I don't suppose you will when it comes to the performance. You'll be on familiar ground by then . . ."

The conversation, never very brilliant, died down as the chorus ended. But Sibylla was feeling well-pleased with herself for the first time that day. She was pleased that Philip Janaway should have joined the cast and she was pleased that he should have walked up and spoken to her like this—quite pointedly, she thought. She would have been still more pleased had she known how handsome she looked. The walk and the sharp night air had put a glow into her cheeks and eyes. Her dress, too, became her with its watery green, and moulded her figure into almost statuesque lines of grace. If Kitty sparkled in the room like a fairy on a Christmas-tree, Sibylla gave it the dignified ornament of a marble goddess, posed against the velvet hangings of the door.

A thin, elderly man, like a pin with a big head, rose from the piano-stool.

"I should be glad if the Lady Angela, the Lady Saphir and the Lady Ella would be so good as to step forward and go through their parts."

Violet Faircloth, Sibylla, and Philip Janaway's sister Grace went up to the piano with their music.

Mr. Foddington was the organist of All Hallows, the big church that had been built on the London Road to serve the religious needs of New Marlingate. The church-services were inclined to be evangelically plain, and did not in his opinion offer enough scope for his talents, which he exercised more fully by running a Choral Society that every year performed oratorios, such as *The Messiah* or Stainer's *Crucifixion*, for its friends' delight, and by organizing more ambitious entertainments in the cause of charity.

The idea of producing *Patience* in aid of War Charities was partly his and partly that of young Bertie Pym-Barrett, the son of another Pelham Square family. If Mr. Foddington fancied himself as conductor and musical director, Bertie Pym-Barrett equally fancied himself as producer and stage-manager, to say nothing of the Duke of Dunstable.

Colonel Calverley was to be played by Kenneth Brooke, assistant master at Mr. Jebb's preparatory school for boys, while Major Murgatroyd had been undertaken by Geoffrey Morison, junior partner in Janaway, Morison & Son, the most exclusive firm of solicitors in Marlingate. Young Pym-Barrett had had great difficulty in filling the parts of Bunthorne and Grosvenor, for whom there really was nobody suitable. Philip Janaway had an excellent voice but no experience of acting, while William Kitson, who would have done credit to any non-musical play, was scarcely more than adequate as a baritone. He would not have been offered such an important part if a good family had not been considered more essential than a good voice by the mothers of Marlingate.

These, represented by Mrs. Faircloth and Mrs. Landless, were as important as any member of the cast; indeed on their approval that cast, as well as future audiences, depended. One gust of offence and the production lost not only the amenities of Mrs. Faircloth's drawing-room but all its female performers; and on these Pym-Barrett based his chief hopes of success. The ladies seemed to have all the talents that the men lacked—all except Violet Faircloth, and she had the drawing-room. Grace Janaway and his own sister Rosalind both sang and acted well, and Sibylla Landless, though inclined to be nervous,

had a fine voice and a still finer presence. As for Kitty Landless, she would save any entertainment from mediocrity. Her lovely face, graceful movements and exquisite soprano voice would atone for any deficiencies of the male performers, who would indeed appear in their proper parts as her foils and shadows.

Most of the eligible young men of Marlingate had considered themselves at one time or another in love with Kitty Landless. There were plenty of girls in the town, but none was like Kitty, and the local matrons would be heartily glad when she married and left the field to their less attractive if more deserving daughters.

She herself had never seemed to fall in love, though she accepted the attentions she received and at the moment seemed to encourage those of young Geoffrey Morison. She was spoken of as a flirt, and the censorious hinted at such enormities as pinching her waist and smoking cigarettes. But she was not, on the whole, considered "fast." The town in general spoke of her as a "nice girl" and those who had sons watched their approach of her without anxiety. The Morisons would certainly be pleased if she married Geoffrey, whose sisters were her very dear friends, even though they only sang in the chorus.

*"Twenty lovesick maidens, we—  
Lovesick all against our will . . ."*

How sick the maidens of Marlingate would be of those words before they sang them for the last time!

That night it was not possible to go through all the first act. Mr. Foddington would gladly have prolonged the rehearsal, but Mrs. Faircloth knew her part as chaperone only too well. At ten o'clock she stood up in her majesty of black velvet and Honiton lace, proclaiming that the performers must now go downstairs and have a little supper before they left. With a matronly titter—"I've promised to send you all away by half-past ten."

The party tittered in reply, some reluctantly, some gratefully. Supper was considered a handsome addition to Mrs. Faircloth's already exuberant hospitality and she was loudly voted a brick by Bertie Pym-Barrett as he followed the ladies into the dining-room. Here soup, sandwiches and jelly were served with claret-cup to a standing company by two crackling parlourmaids, still efficient and alert after a sixteen-hour day. Sibylla was pleased to see that Philip Janaway soon found a way to come and stand beside her.

"How are you going home?" he asked.

"We're walking. It isn't far.

"But you're not going alone?"

"Oh, no . . ." She hesitated. If she told him that Geoffrey Morison was coming with them, would he think that it was on her account? She fumbled and stumbled on to the bald statement: "Mr. Morison's seeing us home"—seeing no way of explaining the situation.

But luckily he understood. No doubt Kitty and Geoffrey were gossip by now.

"May I come too?—it's really shorter for me if I walk round by Monypenny Crescent. It saves the hill."

"Oh, of course. I—we'll be delighted."

She could feel her colour mounting and turned away, not knowing how greatly it became her.

"There are one or two things I want to discuss with you—about the opera."

"Yes, of course. How did you feel tonight? I think you sang wonderfully."

He smiled, twirling his moustache.

"Wonderfully badly."

"Oh, no—wonderfully well."

"That's what I thought about you."

"Oh, no—my part was nothing. You have a lot to do."

"More than I like. I wish that you had more. I wish that some of the parts could be changed round."

Did he mean that he wished that she was singing the part of Patience, opposite him, instead of Kitty? She opened her mouth to say, "Oh, no—my voice isn't good enough; I couldn't get those high notes," and then shut it again, in case he had meant something different. While she was silent Violet Faircloth came up with two members of the chorus, Sylvia Pym-Barrett and Dolly Morison.

"Look here, Sibylla. The girls and I have got an idea. How would it be to have a *Patience* Ball at Christmas?"

"You mean a ball for the company?"

"Yes, and their friends; and for others outside, of course. The Christophers would come in from Marlpost, probably, and bring a party, and the Buckroses from Copstreet; and I daresay we'd get people from Bexhill and Eastbourne if we chose a date that didn't clash with anything there."

"I think it would be perfectly delightful." Sibylla saw herself in a new dress, waltzing with Philip Janaway. "How would you run it?—as a subscription affair?"

"We'd have to. I doubt if we'd be able to raise enough money between us to make it an invitation dance. Most of the men think they spent enough last year on the Bachelors' Ball."

"And it wouldn't be much good getting up a Spinsters' Ball," said Dolly Morison, "because we all have our dresses to pay for. Mr. Pym-Barrett says we must have two each and change between the acts."

"If it's subscription," said Bertha, another of the Morison girls who was standing near, "it'll be difficult to keep out the wrong sort of people. I mean, there's all the chorus of Dragoon Guards—Mother would never let us go if men like young Freddie Taylor and Leslie Champion were admitted."

"Oh, we can see that the subscription's more than they can afford. They can't pay much and if we make it a guinea—"

"Randolph Jones can afford a guinea. His father's rolling."

"Yes, but just one or two don't really matter. After all, they won't be able to dance with anybody if they're not introduced. I suggest that we make the tickets a guinea and give the money to the Queen's Fund."

"Marlingate's certainly helping on the war," said Dolly.

"Then let's form a committee and organize the whole thing," said Violet. "You, Sibylla, me, Sylvia, Dolly, Bertha, Kitty. Georgie, of course, if she'd care to. It had better be a ladies' committee, because the men can never get away in the afternoons. We'll meet here and have tea together afterwards. Won't it be fun?"

"It will be perfectly ripping," said Dolly Morison.

"I shall love it," said Sibylla, her eyes full of stars.

## II

HIGHFIELD HOUSE stood on the Coney Banks, at the foot of Cuckoo Hill. For some hundred years or so the Coney Banks had been a place of retirement for Marlingate tradesmen when they left their shops and houses in the High Street, just as the fishermen retiring from Fish Street moved up to Mount Idle, a street of low white houses that cut the slope of All Holland Hill on the opposite

side of the town. Most of the Concy Bank houses were tall and red, with roofs weathered to the golden-brown colour of seaweed and the curved bow-windows of Regency grace. But among them was a bastard growth of Victorian degeneration—a slated terrace or two with oblong bays and verandahs of painted metal, pierced and toothed into a perforation of meaningless adornment.

The school had swallowed up a row of these, cased them in cream-coloured stucco and topped them with a new storey. It made of them a very handsome building, high and important above the smoking huddle of Marlingate's roofs. In summer, when all the windows were open, it was like a giant musical-box, sending out streams of music to float over the town: thundering scales and surging arpeggios, tinkling five-finger exercises and strumming tunes, all mingling together over the roofs and floating down to the shore. In winter, when the windows were closed and the firelight flickered on the class-room ceilings and the hot pipes chuckled and thumped in the assembly hall, it was more like a hive, muffled into a hum; and the groups and couples of darkly, warmly clad girls were like bees as they climbed the streets of the town and swarmed in at the big arched doorway.

No girl was allowed to walk to School alone or with any other girl of whom her mother had not signified approval in a letter to the Head Mistress. Myra Landless walked with Marjorie Denham, who also lived in Monypenny Crescent. She was not especially friendly with her, for she was two or three years older than Myra and eager that she should not forget it. Their association was a matter of local geography, and came to an end once they were inside the school doors. Myra had enjoyed the walk much more when she went with Kitty, and was now best pleased on those occasions, unfortunately rare, when Marjorie was kept at home by a cold or some other impediment, and she must be taken across the town by Rose.

During the last few months she had often wondered whom she loved best—Kitty or Rose. No one else came into any sort of competition with these two. Her father and mother she accepted as part of the nature of things rather than loved with any warmth; indeed sometimes she was a little afraid of them—not because they were often angry or ever unkind, but because they had the power to interfere with her private life, to insert their discipline over her most passionate desires, to bar with their prohibitions the paths that enticed her. Sibylla, though she put herself more out of her way to please her little sister—

being always willing to read to her or tell her stories, to take her for walks or help her with her lessons—shared some of the darkness of the opposition; she too could rebuke and deny. As for Georgina, she did not count much either way. If she seldom interfered with Myra, she seldom entertained her. She was dull and plain and unable to tell stories or provide miraculous answers to sums. Myra had very little use for her.

But Kitty—pretty, sweet, kind Kitty, with her laughter and her merry, loving ways—stood for something more in her sister's life than use. Kitty never read to her or told her stories, and sums were as dark a mystery to her as they were to Myra. But she kissed her and made her laugh, she told her all sorts of funny things about people they knew, she gave her chocolates out of the boxes that were sent to her, and flowers out of her bouquets, she bought her ices and cream buns in Brown's shop, and though she never took her for ordinary, dull walks, she had once taken her all the way to French Landing—right on the other side of the Gringer Cliff—where they had met a gentleman who had brought a basket of cakes and buns and a dear little kettle to boil and make tea out of doors. The excursion had never been repeated—for Myra had most unfortunately forgotten Kitty's injunction not to tell Mother about meeting Mr. Taylor—but it was still alive and blazing in her memory, a beacon which only Kitty's hand could have set alight.

Rose was different—no lighter of beacons, but herself alight with unconsuming fire, a burning bush. For over Rose with her curly brown hair and too pink cheeks flowed the light of Winter Land Farm, away in the country outside of Marlingate, the farm where her parents lived and where Myra would like to live and die. She had first gone there one summer with her nurse when she was a very little girl, to stay there while the grown-up members of the family went to more remote but less exciting places. She had gone there every summer since. When she grew too big to have a nurse—thus Myra told her story to as many of her schoolfellows who would listen and as often as they would—the farmer's eldest daughter had looked after her, and Mother had said that she did it so well that she must come home with them to Marlingate and be nurse-housemaid . . . “and every summer I go back with her there, and other times too if Mother thinks I need a change. I'm going this half-term, because Mother says I've got dark rings under my eyes.”

"Well, there's nothing in that to make you cocky," said Enid Morison, the youngest of that spreading family.

"I'm not cocky. I can't help what happens to my face."

"But you needn't talk so much about it."

Enid was not at all jealous of Myra's eyes, even though romantically set in dark saucers; but she bitterly resented her going away to the country in the unorthodox month of November. No other girl at Highfield House would be going away for the half-term, and it seemed altogether deplorable that such a privilege should fall to a kid like Myra Landless, who was unpopular with the juniors as well as the seniors, being not only cocky but queer—hadn't Dorothy Dodd once heard her talking to herself in a corner of the gymnasium? And Marjorie Denham, who walked with her to school, said that she often talked to herself. She must be balmy.

No one knew, of course, that Myra was talking to Ivy Bethersden.

Rose was the only human creature whom Myra had told about Ivy. She had once tried to tell Kitty, but it had been one of the rare occasions when Kitty had failed her.

"Ivy Bethersden? What a silly, ridiculous name! Does she go to Highfield House?"

"Oh no. She's not anyone I've ever seen. I mean she's someone I imagine. I've made her up."

"I see . . ." Kitty pondered a moment, then shook her head. "You'd better not let anybody at school know you do that sort of thing, and if I were you I'd stop doing it. It'll prevent your having any real friends and make you unpopular with the girls."

Unpopular . . . popular; those were the two words that meant most in Myra's schooldays, as they had in Kitty's. "Please God, make me popular with the girls," was a daily prayer which had not so far been answered. For some unexplained reason she was not popular—she could not help knowing that. Only the duller, smaller members of her class paid her much attention, and nobody asked to sit next her or told her secrets. She could not think why, except that she had a vague, general feeling that she was different from the others. And now Kitty said that Ivy would make things worse. Myra believed her, for Kitty spoke on these matters with the voice of authority and experience. She held her tongue; but not completely. She must talk to somebody about Ivy, for otherwise Ivy lost much of herself. Her

function was to dazzle and impress not only Myra but others who by means of her would be in some mysterious way dazzled and impressed by Myra.

So she talked about Ivy to Rose, who listened without question or comment beyond an occasional "Would you believe it?" or "Well, I never!" Ivy had actually come into being in Rose's home, bearing the name which had seemed so pretty when given to the new baby born at Winter Land Cottage. A better surname had had to be found than Vuggle, and Betherdsen had somehow floated into Myra's dreams —on a sign-post, on a farmer's tongue? she could not say; but it seemed to her an admirable name for her fancy's sole creation.

"Rose, shall I tell you a story about Ivy Betherdsen?"

She could not be always quite sure if Ivy were meant to be a real person or a person in a story. She was real when they went to school, and Ivy was top of the class as well as being the most popular girl in it; she was real when they went to Winter Land and Myra saw her climbing the big oak-tree at the gate or galloping round the Oven Field on the farm-horses, standing triumphantly like a circus-rider, with a foot on each. But she was in a story when she was chased by wolves in Russia or married Prince George instead of the Princess May, or (as recently) won the Victoria Cross, by riding singly and unarmed against a Boer commando and rescuing Colonel Baden-Powell from their clutches.

Lately the story atmosphere had predominated, and Myra had gone so far as to attempt to write down one or two of her adventures—an experiment which came to an end when the grown-ups decided, not without reason, that it had a bad effect on her homework.

"You have so many pretty stories to read," her mother had said—"Mrs. Molesworth and Mrs. L. T. Meade and 'Brenda' and lots of others, all working hard to make little people like you happy—that it really isn't necessary for you to write them."

But there was a difference between reading and writing stories which Mother would never understand.

Rose had two younger sisters called Queenie and Daisy and two little brothers called Bob and Tom. Myra did not care very much for any of them, nor was her association with them at all close. Mrs. Landless had demanded a certain degree of isolation, for fear that Myra should pick up an accent—or even "words." Her life at Winter

Land was still very much as it had always been—a lady's child staying in the house of her inferiors under careful guardianship. The only change was that the guardianship was now provided by those inferiors themselves. Rose slept in a bed in Myra's room, just as she slept at home, and had her meals with her in the little crowded parlour which Mrs. Lusted let to summer visitors. It was simply Rose taking the nurse's place, queerly detached from her own family and not a little proud to be with them under such conditions, which they, for their part, most loyally observed. Myra was among them as a little guarded queen, to be protected from the ruggedness of general existence at Winter Land as much as from any more concrete, external dangers.

What she loved and looked forward to in these visits was not the people but the place. For her the farm—representing her only experience of a world outside Marlingate—stood for adventure fortified by a sense of personal security, for heaven and fairyland brought into a nursery compact of warmth and peace. She felt more at home there than she felt in Monypenny Crescent, because she felt herself the mistress of her own little kingdom. She was free to enjoy without intrusions or prohibitions the fresh white bedroom with a pear-tree at the window, the cosy blue parlour with the stuffed birds and gay pictures, the patch of garden where the blossom fell in May and the gold and coral leaves in November.

Winter Land squatted like the hen in the nest of its orchards, at the top of Watt's Palace Lane, which runs steeply down the hill to the River Tillingham, only a thread of a stream in the fields so near its source. Across the valley the lane could be seen climbing mysteriously into the woods of Brede Eye, by Watt's Hill Farm, which was the only other house it passed. Myra often wondered what had become of the palace and where it had stood; but Rose's father would laugh and say he reckoned there hadn't never been no palace there, and that all that had happened was that folks had made fun of old Mus' Watt—Toddy Watt's father—when he built on those gables to his house on the hill.

But in spite of Rose's father, Myra felt sure that there had been a palace once, a palace full of royal people, in olden, golden times. She had begun to take an interest in history—the first time she had ever taken an interest in anything at school—and from the warm safety of her world at Winter Land her imagination roamed as it had never roamed from her closely-defended world in Marlingate. Ivy Bethersden

became the queen of some knightly court which Myra saw established in a kind of rainbow down by the stream. Sir Walter de Watt had built a palace for his bride, the Lady Ivy de Betherden, and there had been dancing there, and banqueting and lute-playing, and visits from Kings and Favourites and Natural Sons and all the shining cavalcade of history—so much colour, so much movement, so much change, such a shining, shifting rainbow, that she could not even tell herself about it all, but would sit entranced, bewildered, gazing as if she had a kaleidoscope at her eye.

It was with a feeling of alarm that Myra heard she was to play with some new, unknown children during this half-term visit to Winter Land. A new family had come to the next farm—Ellenwhorne, only a mile away at the throws by Maidenbower—and apparently Mother considered this farmer's children as different from others with whom Myra was allowed to talk only in the most distant manner and never to play.

"But, Mother, is it all right?—I mean, are they daughters of gentlemen like the girls at school?"

Dismay had made her use in her own defence an argument more commonly brought against her.

"Certainly, dear, or you wouldn't be allowed to play with them."

"But their father's a farmer—like Mr. Lusted."

"No, not like Mr. Lusted. Mr. Street is a gentleman farmer, which makes all the difference."

Myra absorbed in silence this addition to her knowledge of life. She did not look forward to meeting the young Streets, whom she saw as invaders of her privacy at Winter Land or even as challengers of her reign. She had always been awkward and shy with strangers, and had she only known it, this was one reason for the enforced acquaintance. Lately Mrs. Landless had taken alarm at her daughter's increasing divergence from what she considered a normal, happy child. Perhaps it was due to her being like this alone at the end of the family; but she certainly seemed to be growing more fanciful, more timid and yet at the same time in some ways more aggressive. It would do her good to mix with the little Streets, whom Mrs. Morison (who had known the family uncertain years ago) proclaimed to be well born, in spite of their father's unaccountable choice of a profession. Mrs. Buckrose of the Manor had called on Mrs. Street,

thus passing her as fit for general acquaintance, and Mrs. Landless herself would have called had she not lived too far away. So it had been easy for Mrs. Morison to write and ask for Myra to be invited to tea at Ellenwhorne.

She went on the Saturday, wearing her blue serge frock and a scarlet tam-o'-shanter that made her face look even paler than shyness had bleached it. Rose took her to the door, but did not stay. The warm, red, creeper-dripping porch of Ellenwhorne held her like a frame against the background of wintry sky as the door opened.

It was not opened by a maidservant but by a boy two or three years older than herself. "Hullo," he said. "You've come." Then as she stood silent he added, "You're Myra Landless, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes"—on legs that felt weak and reluctant, she walked in. The hall was crowded with faces—rosy, bright-eyed, laughing, like faces on a Christmas-card. Some were boys and some were girls. She had for some reason taken for granted that all the Streets were girls. But here were three boys and only two girls . . . The boy who had let her in told her their names—Arthur, Eric and (himself) Toby, Lilian and Dora. The girls were younger than the boys, younger than herself, so dignity required that she should attach herself to their brothers. Yet she had had very little experience of boys, who figured only remotely in her life, at parties, where the girls invariably eclipsed them in interest and entertainment.

"The idea is," said Toby, "that we take the dogs for a run. Mother wants some candles and some tea at Beathope's shop, so we'll go to the village and then come home round by Dew Farm and the fields. What do you say to that?"

Myra said: "It'll be very nice." But what she thought was altogether different. She was even more afraid of strange dogs than she was of strange children, and knew even less about them than she knew about boys. Moreover, she was shocked by the unorthodoxy of the proceedings. The five Street children tumbled out into the lane without a single grown-up in charge. The boys wore mufflers but were without hats, the girls were hatted but gloveless. They ran along the road and whooped with a big, curly retriever, which Myra felt sure would knock her down, and a little sharp-nosed terrier, which she knew would bite her.

"What sort of dog have you got at home?" asked Toby.

"We haven't got any dogs. Mother says—I mean, we haven't got one."

"How rotten for you!"

The pity in his voice made her feel insulted, and she rose in her own defence.

"But we've got a cat. At least, he lives next door, but he spends most of his time with us because he likes our cook better."

"Oh, cats are no fun at all. I don't like cats. Have you any horses?"

"No." This was a sorry catechism, and she made a desperate effort to account for her deficiencies. "You see, we live in a town."

"Oh, do you? I should hate to live in a town."

"Have you never lived in a town?"

"No, never. Before we came here we lived at Stelling Minnis, near Canterbury, but that was just as much country as this."

He had made her feel inferior because she lived in a town, and had neither a dog nor a horse at home. Something must be done to impress him. . . .

"I was second in history last week. Do you like history?"

"I'm afraid I don't like lessons at all. I like games. Do you play cricket?"

"No, I don't." Here was another set-back; but she achieved a measure of condescension over it. "Girls don't play cricket," she enlightened him.

"Lilian and Dora do. If you like we'll all play cricket after tea—that's to say, if it's light enough, which I'm afraid it won't be."

Myra hoped that it would not, as she knew she was an indifferent player of any game and doubted her capacity to distinguish herself in this one. Toby did not ask her any more questions and she feared that it was because her answers had made her seem so dull and uninteresting. He had run on ahead with the retriever and his brother Arthur, their iron-studded boots ringing like ponies' hoofs on the hard flints of the road. It was a relief not to be further exposed, but her heart was still full of a sense of inferiority. What could she tell him about herself that would change his pity to admiration?

It was difficult to think of anything at all likely to impress him, and at the moment she lacked not only the substance of notability but the chance of displaying it. Her company had become fluid—running, mixing, scattering, flowing, so that she never had more than a few moments' speech with any of them. She plodded among them

almost in silence, and fell back for comfort on thoughts of Ivy Bethersden—Ivy in the pinnacled rainbow of Watt's Palace, the mistress of four dogs all as big as Shetland ponies and fierce as wolves, yet abject to her nod, of six white horses, all with the trained, arched necks and curling manes and prancing steps of the circus. . . .

Her mind was away floating in its bubble while the Streets invaded Beathope's shop, daringly issuing adult orders for tea and candles and squandering a whole sixpence on barley-sugar and brandy-balls. She came closer to earth under the influence of the paper bags held out to her: "Have one, Myra—one of mine, I mean. You've had one of his." Apparently all the Street children had money and were free to spend it as they chose. Myra wondered what Mrs. Street was like. She could not be like Mother—perhaps she was like Rose.

The way home revealed a country she had never seen before. Her walks with Rose were constricted and familiar, limited by fears for her shoes and her frock. But now, utterly reckless of such things, they were all pouring into the big field below Dew Farm, and following the hedgerow towards a gap that opened on the Tillingham Marshes. The dogs barked, put up rabbits, rushed after them, lost them, and came back to rear and romp with muddy paws. The children chased one another and the dogs. Passing through a little, wind-stripped shaw, they groped among the fallen leaves for chestnuts, which they crammed into the girls' hats and the boys' handkerchiefs. The sky began to darken. It was low and grey, and all the fading light seemed to lie in the carpet of chestnut leaves and the rosehaws that still hung on the thickets. Myra, unused to such an energy and dissipation of progress, and feeling a little tired and lonely, trailed along the hedge, searching for blackberries, of which a few still lingered, tasting of nothing but rain.

"Hullo"—Toby had joined her—"found many chestnuts?"

"No; I've been blackberrying."

"It's rather late for that. I don't suppose there's any left worth picking. You ought to have some chestnuts to take home—I expect they'd be glad of them at Winter Land. Here, have some of mine."

He held out a large, grimy handkerchief, knotted at the corners. Myra hesitated.

"I've nothing to carry them in."

"You've got your tam. Take it off and we'll fill it up."

Marlingate was ten miles away, and though Winter Land was nearer, it would not be inclined to take so harsh a view of a misused hat. Myra snatched off her tam-o'-shanter and Toby filled it with chestnuts.

"There, that's for you to take home."

"Thank you so much."

She felt partly rehabilitated, and proceeded according to her best inspirations still further to secure herself.

"I like walking in the fields much better than on the roads. The roads are dull, I think."

"They are, sometimes; but you can have fun on them too. We haven't been to all the places round here yet, but we're finding out a lot. Do you know who lives in that big house over there?"

They stood in a little field below the shaw, and far away across the river they could see the twilight focussing on a low white house. Dark woods crept behind it, and the long façade had a gleaming, pearly look that made Myra feel a sudden quickening of her heart and a throb which was almost of recognition, as if she had walked into one of her own dreams.

"Oh, yes. . . . That's Watt's Palace."

"It's nowhere near Watt's Palace Lane."

"But the lane goes there if you walk on far enough. It isn't called Watt's Palace Lane because the palace is *in* it, but because it leads to it, if you know what I mean."

She had just discovered this for herself and a lot of things came clearer.

"Oh, I see. . . . You go up through the wood and then along by Haneholt's Farm—is that the way?"

Yes—Myra supposed it was.

"It looks a fine house. Do you know who lives there?"

At this moment Watt's Palace was real—no place in history—for were not she and Toby standing together and watching the twilight rubbing it into the woods? Almost without hesitation she answered:

"A little girl called Ivy Betherdsden."

"Oh, really! . . . How old is she? She doesn't live there by herself, I suppose?"

"No; her father's a gentleman farmer."

Watt's Palace had come to earth, but to an earth grown suddenly more dazzling than any rainbow.

Toby was asking her:  
"Have you ever been there?"

Myra shook her head. If she said that she had been to Watt's Palace when she had not she would be telling a lie.

"No, I've never been there. But I know her quite well. She has a house in Marlingate too, you see. But she's like me—she likes the country best. And she's got four dogs and six horses of her own."

"Has she really? Six horses . . . that's as many as dad's got on the whole farm."

He looked impressed. He was walking along beside her now and seemed really interested in what she was saying. Things were going very well and her confidence grew . . . soared . . . swelled. . . .

"Oh, Ivy's horses aren't farm-horses. They're circus-horses and she rides them all—all at once, I mean. She stands on their backs and jumps from one horse to another."

"What an extraordinary thing!" She became aware of his grey eyes staring at her in a sort of amazement. "Who ever taught her?"

"Nobody taught her. She taught herself."

"I don't see how she could have. I once tried to stand up on a horse's back, but I came off almost at once."

"Well, you see, Ivy's mother rode in a circus, so Ivy has been doing that sort of thing ever since she was a tiny baby. She has a fluffy dress all over spangles and her horses have their manes and tails dyed to match her dresses—one's blue and one's red and one's yellow and—"

"What *are* you talking about?"

His eyes, still looking into hers, seemed to grow darker with their question, and Myra felt a sudden bump of doṣabt.

"It's true—you *can* dye horses' manes and tails, though some people say you *can't*."

"I know you *can't*. Nobody would do such a thing."

"But you *can*. Ivy's always done it."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe you're telling me about a real person. It's something you've read in a book."

"Oh, no, it *isn't*."

"Then you've made it up yourself."

"I—I—" faltered Myra. Her swollen confidence had burst, leaving her in a curious state of flatness and bewilderment. Could she say she had not 'made up' all she had told him about Ivy Betersden? Yet, on the other hand, could she say that she had? If she did, it

would not be telling him the real truth, because what he meant was quite different from what she meant.

With a sinking heart she saw his eyes turn cold with disapproval.

"I think it's mean to tell stories."

She was horrified. A lie had always been a capital sin both at home and at school, but it had never entered her head that anyone could think she was telling lies when she talked about Ivy Bethersden. Certainly Rose never had, and now it seemed outrageous and insulting of Toby to do so.

"I'm not telling stories. I mean, it's a story I've made up—it's not a lie."

"But you're not telling it like a story. You're telling it like a lie—as if it was true."

"Well, it is true. Ivy's a little girl I make up things about, but she's not in a story—at least not always. She's not in a story this afternoon."

He looked puzzled, but as if he were trying hard to understand her.

"You mean that she really does live in that house—that we could go and see her there now if we could get so far?"

For some reason this probing hurt her, and her endeavours to answer truthfully—or rather, with literal accuracy—brought a feeling almost of physical sickness.

"No—she doesn't live anywhere—not for you atcherly to see."

"And is that house really called Watt's Palace?"

"I—I don't know. It may be—but no one's ever told me."

"And yet you say you aren't telling stories."

He walked away from her.

After that nothing seemed quite so good as it had been before—the fading day, the woods that were either shadows behind mysterious farms or hearts of lingering light, the hedges with their sparks of holly and haw, and all the wonder of being in the fields at dusk, were spoiled by a feeling of humiliation corrupted by injustice. For she was not in her conscience aware of having done wrong; on the contrary, she had refused to tell a lie, to say that she had been to Watt's Palace when she had not. But there was no use trying to explain the difference to Toby—he was a stupid boy as well as a disagreeable one; her moral values were not emancipated enough to call him a prig.

By the time they were all back at Ellenwhorne the evening star had pricked the sky below the clouds and Myra's mood had enlarged from

resentment to aggression. She was determined that Toby should not spoil what remained of the day's entertainment. All the afternoon she had been looking forward to her tea, feeling sure that it would be a good one and a compensation for anything she might have to endure in the way of shyness or fear—she had not envisaged any darker threats. And here was tea, coming up to her highest expectations, laid on a huge table by a roaring fire, with only a low proportion of bread-and-butter among the crowded plates of buns and scones and cakes. Mrs. Street, moreover, proved as amiable and Rose-like as imagination had suggested—even joining in the general laughter when she found that her tea and candles had been left in the chestnut shaw below Dew Farm.

"Well, you'll have to go and fetch them tomorrow, that's all."

Not so would Mrs. Landless have received such tidings.

At tea Myra found herself sitting between Arthur and Lilian, and did her best to impress them, with an eye on their elder brother across the table. She was very different now from the timid child who had crept into the house barely two hours ago. Her voice rose shrilly among the general gabble and laughter as she held forth on a subject with which she had already wearied her friends at school—the beauty and genius of her sister Kitty and the triumph which was to be hers after Christmas in the Concert Hall at Marlingate.

"They're doing the opera *Patience*, you know, and Kitty's *Patience*—she's on the stage more than anybody else, and she has more to sing than any other lady—more than Sibylla or Violet Faircloth, though she's much younger."

Kitty had become an almost adequate substitute for Ivy Bethersden, with the advantage that she was "true" in the most rigid, Toberian sense of the word. Even Toby could not stare with cold, incredulous eyes while she told his brother and sister what a lovely voice Kitty had, full of sweet, high notes, how pretty she looked, and what a gorgeous dress she would wear, with a quilted satin skirt and flowery bodice and a leghorn hat covered with ribbons and roses.

"She's a sort of milkmaid, you know, and she has to be in love with a man called Grosvenor, and there's another called Bunthorne, who's rather silly, but Kitty marries Grosvenor—not really, I mean, but in the play. I heard Mrs. Pym-Barrett tell Mother that she was the making of the whole thing, and a lady who came to tea said it would be worth paying for a seat just to have the pleasure of looking at her. She's

going to make lots of money for the soldiers, and I'm going to see her act—Mother said I could."

Myra was as excited about *Patience* as any member of the cast, and found a particular relish in Kitty's performance, which seemed to give her little sister at least some reflection of her glory. It was terrible when suddenly in the midst of her oration her eyes met Toby's and saw in them the same cold incredulity that she had seen when she spoke of Ivy Betersden. The whole of her seemed to rise in outrage and revolt, breaking into the pleasant flow of her brag with "It's true—it's quite true. Kitty really is my sister and all I'm telling you about her is quite true."

"Of course it's true, dear," said Mrs. Street, a little puzzled at this sudden interruption of herself by the orator.

"Yes; but Toby doesn't think it is—he doesn't believe me."

"But of course he believes you. Why shouldn't he?"

Myra did not answer the question. Indeed she fixed her eyes on Toby—eyes in which already blazed some angry tears.

"I don't believe he believes me. He's looking at me as if he didn't." Then challenging him in the heat of her indignation: "If you don't believe me, why don't you say so, instead of looking at me like that?"

There was a moment's pause, at the end of which he said quietly: "Of course I believe you."

But his eyes still held that remote, incredulous look.

"I'm sure Toby wouldn't be so rude and unkind as to doubt your word," said his mother tranquilly, "even if you'd told us something much more improbable than what you've told us about your sister. As a matter of fact I've heard about her from Mrs. Morison—her girls are in the play too, I understand. It's all very interesting and I wish we could go to the performance; but I'm afraid that's quite out of our power."

Myra was silent, uncertain of herself and the situation. Her character had been vindicated—or rather had never been assailed—but she had somehow lost the wish to boast any more about Kitty. She wondered whether Toby believed her now that his mother had supported her statements . . . and why had he said he believed her when he so obviously did not? Was it because he liked her or for some other reason? He had had the chance to expose her but had not taken it. No one else she knew—none of her family or the girls at school—would have resisted such a temptation. Were boys very different from

girls? They were certainly more difficult to understand—it would be exciting to have a boy for a friend. She wondered if Toby was her friend.

### III

**W**INTER came to Marlingate as a ghost of its own sharpness in other years. This first winter of the war was very different from those only two or three years back, when the reservoirs had frozen in the Town Park, and the sea foam had clung in icicles from the breakwaters, and the seagulls, crowding inland, had broken the air with hungry cries and the beating of innumerable wings. A soft, damp wind flew over the town, flattening the columns of its chimney smoke, whirling in warm gusts through the Petty Passageway, which linked the draughts of Fish Street and High Street, blowing a false spring into the gardens of New Marlingate, where roses hung against sheltered walls and violets put purple shadows into shrubbery corners.

Christmas came, with coloured lights in the shops to prick the gathering dusk. Under stars of crimson, blue and green the Christmas goods glittered among frosted cotton-wool, and sprigs of holly made a riot of the soberest stock. The butchers' and fishmongers' were hung with capons, pheasants, hares, geese and turkeys. The whole of one wall of Budgen's stores, which had a frontage in Zuriel Place as well as in High Street, was draped with monstrous turkeys, a curtain of crimson wattles and pearly breasts, giving out a sweet rich Christmas smell of poultry, lard and sawdust.

The town was much as it had been in other years; yet it was not quite the same. The poulters' and drapers' and fancy-goods shops might suggest nothing but Christmas spending and feasting, but the stationers' and newsagents' proclaimed a darker antimony. Well away from the coloured paper and coloured glass, posters announced "Another British Disaster"—"The Tragedy of Magersfontein"—"Heavy Losses at Colenso."

The war, about which everyone in Marlingate had felt so confident, was going badly. Even Myra was conscious of a blight on her Christmas shopping—the careful dispersal of half a crown—a sense of loss, as if a cheerful military band had suddenly stopped playing. She had meant to buy a medallion picture of General Gatacre for her hat, but

after what her father had said about him, it seemed better to spend her Saturday's penny on a stick of rock.

Colonel Landless took the bad news to heart with a bitterness grounded in his own professional pride and experience. It was terrible for him to think that an untrained, barbarous rabble like the Boers had worked such havoc on trained soldiers of the Queen. He spent a lot of time at his Club, conducting his own campaign in South Africa, while at home he was sullen and morose, snapping at his daughters for their apparent indifference to their country's shame. He even seemed to think that the long anticipated and ardently worked for *Patience Ball* should not take place.

"Here are thousands of our lads dying out on the veldt, and thousands of pounds of public money being wasted on muddles and mistakes, and all you girls can think of doing is to dance and spend money on dress."

His daughters were righteously indignant.

"Really, Father," said Sibylla, "I don't think you need say that. We're putting up the dance to help the war."

"And in what way will it help it?"

"We're sending the profits to Lady Audrey Buller's fund for the troops."

"And what profits do you expect to make after you've hired the Assembly Room and ordered an expensive supper? No, the patriotic thing to do would be to give up the ball and send Lady Audrey Buller the money you would have spent on it—that might be a sum worth having."

The girls smiled and shrugged, but discussed the situation among themselves more resentfully.

"I think it's very unfair of Father to talk like that," said Sibylla, always the most aggrieved. "We're doing all we can to help the soldiers at the front. Here we are, slaving away at the ball—I can't tell you how many letters I've written in the last two days, and yesterday I was down at the Assembly Room the whole morning without the heating turned on. And it's not only the ball—there's the opera as well; we're getting up that entirely for the benefit of war charities, and goodness knows how hard we'll all have worked before we've through with it. There can't be many people in the country who are doing more than we are."

"What more can we do?" asked Violet Faircloth. "Does he think we ought to go out to the front as nurses or something?"

They all laughed.

"He said that if he was younger he'd go out himself," said Georgie.

"I've heard there's going to be a great recruiting campaign after Christmas," said Violet. "They want young men to join the Yeomanry—that ought to please him. I believe Mrs. Lambert's nephew, Captain Spellman, is coming down to Marlingate to address a meeting."

"Will he be here in time for the ball?"

"I don't think so—she said it would be towards the end of January. I wonder if he'll wear khaki."

"Sure to, I should think."

"He's not bad-looking," said Kitty. "I remember him when he was staying down here three or four years ago. He had just left Sandhurst then."

"I wonder," said Georgie, "who they'll get to join the Yeomanry in Marlingate."

"Father," said Kitty, and they all giggled.

The ball took place, its lustre undimmed by shadows of Stormberg and Magersfontein; and—which was really more important and much less likely—the three new dresses arrived in plenty of time. Each of the Landless girls had decided that it was essential for her to have a new gown, and as each of the Ladies' Committee and a good number of the lady subscribers had decided the same, the Marlingate dress-makers lived through some harassed moments, and the afternoon before the dance was hectic with goadings and recriminations.

The dancing began at nine, and at eight o'clock the three girls went upstairs to show themselves in their bravery to their little sister. Not only were their dresses new, but their hair had been transfigured by Mr. Hebden, from the Maison Hebden in the Marine Arcade, who had attended them during the afternoon in their own bedrooms under the chaperonage of Mrs. Landless. They each had a "tea-pot handle" at the back, a design of marcelled ridges at the sides and a thick mat of curls on their foreheads. From this pattern there had been no variety, yet it was astonishing how different they all looked.

Of course Kitty looked the prettiest, because not only was her hair like corn in sunshine but below its rippled gleam her face was a wild rose and her mouth a bunch of cherries. Only the powder and rouge

of a later generation could have prevented Sibylla and Georgina from looking sallow. The latter had, moreover, made her usual unfortunate choice of colours—a pale green *mousseline de soie* striped with gold and trellised with mauve sweet-peas. It was a lovely piece of material—and Myra, who saw clothes as things in themselves, without any regard to faces, stroked it lovingly—but it did not suit her. Sibylla was better served by a close pattern of rosebuds smudged into a ground of pale pink satin, with clouds of tulle falling over her big balloon sleeves. Myra could not make up her mind whether this was the prettiest of the three or Kitty's affair of roses and forget-me-nots sprinkled over pale blue chiffon with drops of crystal dew. Her belt was woven of daringly combined strands of pink and blue ribbon, and the same colours in *bébé*-ribbon size edged the minute frills that surged like foam over her bodice and sleeves and ruffled her skirt to well above the knee. Sibylla did not approve of Kitty's dress; she said you could not wear pink and blue together—it made you look noticeable. To which Kitty replied that that was her idea in wearing them, and Sibylla looked quite cross.

As her youngest elder sister kissed her good-night Myra whispered, "Kitty, if I was a young man I should want you to marry me"; which made Kitty laugh deliciously in Myra's neck and give her another kiss.

The Assembly Room was on the Marine Parade, one of its principal buildings and a monument to the times when Marlingate winters were gay with fashion and festivity. In those days peers had houses in the new town north of the park, and the Mayor and Aldermen who had given their names to its development themselves presided in elegance over its revels.

Things were very different now. The present Mayor was a retired coal-merchant from High Street, and the ball would have received the veto of every mamma in Marlingate had he attempted to preside at it. Neither did any peers live in the new town, which, where it was genteel at all, had fallen into the hands of a few obstinate better-class survivors like Mrs. Faircloth and retired Army men like Colonel Landless.

By day the Assembly Room had rather a dingy look, as the salt winds had corroded the blandness of its stucco, making it in need of more frequent coats of paint than the borough could afford. But on this especial night the Christmas moon had given it back something of its

old radiance. With its pilasters and architrave it rose like some ancient Greek temple towards the stars, bathed in a white light which cast blue shadows. An amber path reached across the pavement from the open door, as one by one the carriages pulled up in front of it and girls in frilly, trailing dresses, with their faces cupped like flowers in the calices of their opera-cloaks, sped up the beam to the entrance hall, their men like shadows following them.

The Landless family arrived just after half-past eight. It had been agreed that the Committee should assemble before anyone else—to see that everything was in order, the refreshments, the waiters, the cloak-room attendants in their places, and Herr Maurice Wurm's White Viennese Band established on its daïs behind palms and trails of smilax, ready to strike up the first waltz at nine o'clock. Violet Faircloth and her mother were already there, and the Morisons arrived soon afterwards. Sibylla was glad to have a dignified reason for being early; it made a sad difference to one's programme if one was late and found half the men booked up before one came. She looked forward to no more empty spaces than could be covered by a visit to the cloak-room.

A great effort had been made to keep the numbers of the sexes equal, but a subscription dance was always more difficult to organize in this way than an invitation affair, and before this one began a rumour went round the room that the girls were to outnumber the men by nearly a dozen. There was always a tendency to surplus females in Marlingate festivities, and most of the local girls were used to sitting with brave, smiling faces beside their chaperones or poking indefinitely at their hair in front of a cloak-room mirror. But the trouble was that it was always the same girls who had to do this—there was no fair division of the wallflower bed. Some girls were never in it, and needless to say one of these girls was Kitty. Tonight she could not have had a longer waiting-list at the back of her programme if the surplus dancers had all been men.

Sibylla watched her enviously. Her careless happiness was almost an affront. If she had obviously struggled for her successes, and cast triumphant glances as she made them, at least her behaviour would have been normal and tolerable. But her very casualness proclaimed her a superior being to her sisters—a different clay as well as a different mould. It was not that she appeared unaware of her charms or refused to employ them on the men who came up to her and lingered round her. But she seemed to take their homage as a matter of course—a

matter that was hardly worth talking about in the cab on the way home. While Sibylla and Georgina laboured their achievements, anxious to show how much they had enjoyed themselves, how much they had been sought after by Mr. This or Mr. That, Kitty would sit back silent and smiling, as if her own triumphs were too obvious to be told. Already Sibylla could see her in the homeward cab tonight . . .

Not that she really had much to complain of—unlike poor Georgie, who with almost a swagger of defeat had sat down beside her mother and Mrs. Faircloth as soon as the dancing began. Out of twenty-three dances she was booked for twenty-two, which would have been quite excellent if the unpartnered dance had not been the one just before supper. In this she had suffered a grievous disappointment. She had confidently expected to be asked to go in to supper with Philip Janaway, but though he had asked her for no less than four dances altogether, they had been at the beginning and the end of the programme. His sisters had tactlessly invited two cousins to stay with them for the ball, and the female cousin must be Philip's supper choice. Sibylla did not view her with jealousy or alarm; she did not regard her as a rival except in the prestige of the moment. But that in itself was bad enough: all the happiness of the evening would be wiped out if she had to go in to supper with the chaperones, or perhaps with someone's younger brother still at school and sweating in his first tail suit.

With her heart full of these anxieties, she could not extract all the pleasure she had hoped from her dances with Philip Janaway. He was as charming and admiring as she could have wished, but the shadows of coming humiliation lay over the hour, darkening even his praise of her new gown.

“It suits you, you know—it makes you look . . .”

His eyes finished the sentence, fixed most complacently upon her as they waltzed together to a tune from *The Runaway Girl*.

When the dance was over, they sat in the palm-shadowed angle of one of the screens that broke up the ante-room for decorous flirtation.

“I’m afraid I’m on duty tonight,” he said with a rueful smile; then as her looks questioned him: “on duty as the attentive cousin. The girls would insist on asking Beryl and Freddie—they said it wouldn’t make the numbers unequal, as if that was the only thing that mattered. They didn’t know how much I wanted to take you in to supper.”

She coloured deeply and for a moment was fortified.

"I—I'm sorry you couldn't. I mean, I quite understand, of course . . ."

"May I book you for supper at the next dance, whenever it is, that we're at together?"

"Oh, thank you very much. I should love to."

She broke off; Violet Faircloth was bearing down on them.

"Sibylla, have you heard?—Mr. Janaway . . . have you heard?—isn't it dreadful about Mr. Brooke?"

They both stared at her, Sibylla speechless with vexation. Her best friend had never been more unwelcome.

"What about Brooke? What has he done?" asked Philip Janaway.

"He's going to join the army—throwing up his part in *Patience* and joining the Imperial Yeomanry—"

"But can Jebb let him go?"

"Evidently—for he's going, and leaving us stranded high and dry more than half-way through the rehearsals. It'll be impossible to get anyone to take on Colonel Calverley now, and the whole thing may have to be cancelled."

"Oh, come," said Janaway. "I don't suppose that need happen. There are some good singers in the chorus, and no doubt one of them—"

"And then have a girl or her mother say that she's not going to act because of the dreadful people we've got in the cast. I tell you there aren't any *possible* men left in Marlingate. And Mr. Brooke has such a lovely voice . . . I really think he oughtn't to have treated us like this."

"Perhaps he wants to serve his country."

Sibylla's words sprang from malice rather than patriotism. She still felt annoyed with Violet.

"Perhaps he does. But he could have waited till after the performance. There's more than one way of helping on the war."

"If Mr. Jebb can spare him, surely we can."

"I don't see that at all. It's holiday time now and Mr. Jebb can easily get a new master before next term. But we're right in the middle of rehearsals—"

Here she was herself interrupted by the band striking up some bars of *Floradora* in preparation for the Lancers.

"I'm engaged to Bertie Pym-Barrett for this," she said. "Perhaps



"Well, your mistake has been a lucky one for me. I thought I might have to go in to supper with the dowagers," Sibylla blushed again, remembering how like had been her own expectations. "And I should have deserved it. One has no business to be late for a dance, and I'm double-dyed in guilt because I also mistook the hour. I thought dancing began at half-past nine."

"We never start later than nine in Marlingate. Some of the people here have come from miles out in the country."

"Indeed. I might have realized that—apart from having the right time printed on my ticket. I'm afraid there's no excuse for me, and you're extremely merciful to spare me my well-earned punishment."

At that moment Sibylla's partner arrived to claim her for the *Washington Post*.

The next dance was a waltz and Sibylla entered the supper-room with a swimming gaze. Never before had she felt quite like that after a waltz and she could not account for her own sensations. She was a hardened waltzer and Mr. Roker had danced perfectly, threading the whirling maze with assurance and grace, never once bumping her or spinning her. How was it, then, that she felt in a sort of dream, as if nothing in the room were quite real but he and she? She forgot to look out for her sisters or Violet Faircloth or even for Philip Janaway. They had sat down at a table where there were only strangers, and she felt no desire to move or seek her friends. Neither at the moment did she want to talk. He had scarcely talked at all while they were dancing, and now, for some strange reason, she did not want him to begin. She did not seem to know what to say to him. Men liked bright, talkative girls . . . but for the first time she doubted the foundations of her social training.

The spell was broken by cups of chicken soup being set down in front of them by a waiter. Sibylla might be shocked out of her traditions to the extent of sitting in silence, but to eat in silence was impossible. He would think her bad-mannered, dull-witted. . . .

"Are you staying long in Marlingate?"

"How do you know I don't live here?"

"I—I don't know, of course"—she was taken aback by the way he had swung a challenge out of her polite enquiry—"except that I've never seen you before."

"And have you seen every man in Marlingate?"

"I think I have—all those of our class, I mean."

"What a picture that conjures up!"

He was smiling at her, but he made her feel nervous and unsure of herself. She was not used to light exchanges and anxiously fingered her roll as she blundered out a reply.

"Practically all the men who are—gentlemen," she hesitated over the word, uncertain if she ought to use it, "are acting in *Patience* and I see them constantly."

"Acting in *Patience*—Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*?"

She told him about the opera, feeling on safer ground.

"And what part are you playing?"

"I'm the Lady Saphir."

"I must come and hear you sing. I'm sure that you sing delightfully."

She coloured, not so much at his flattery as at the realization that if he meant to hear her sing he must be staying in the town for a certain time—not merely for the dance.

"The performance is at the end of February."

"And can seats be booked now?"

"Yes, at Bond's Library in the Marine Arcade."

"I'll go tomorrow and book one in the middle of the front row."

"That will be rather too close, I'm afraid."

"Not at all. I want to be close—to you."

She turned crimson. What did he mean by speaking like that? He should not do it—not so soon. But she made no attempt to stop him as he continued:

"I'm coming specially to see and hear you. I've seen *Patience* many times, but never with you as Lady Saphir. That's what makes the difference."

"But you don't know how I sing."

"I don't care if you can't sing at all."

She was speechless. Never in her life had anyone spoken to her in this way—to Kitty, yes, no doubt, but never to Sibylla. He must have seen that he had overwhelmed her, for he turned the conversation into more ordinary channels. He asked her if she had lived long in Marlingate and told her in exchange that he had come for the winter and was staying at the Marine Hotel. He did not explain himself at all and she was left wondering how it was that a man of his age—he did not look more than thirty-five—had the money and leisure to spend the winter at a seaside resort. She did not think he could have come

to Marlingate for his health. But she was too shy to ask him any question more pointed than:

“Have you known the Kings a long time?”

“Not very long. We were staying in the same hotel at Mentor two winters ago. That’s how I came to know them.”

“Daisy’s pretty, don’t you think?”

“I dare say many people would think so, but personally I don’t admire fair women.”

Sibylla looked away.

“She’s in the chorus of *Patience*.”

“Everyone seems to be acting in *Patience*.”

“We’ve had great difficulty in filling all the parts—Marlingate isn’t a large place. And now one of the principal men—a Mr. Brooke who plays Colonel Calverley—is throwing up his part to go and join the Yeomanry. Everyone’s dreadfully upset.”

“Have many people gone to the war from this town?”

“I don’t think so—yet. But there’s to be a big recruiting campaign in a week or two.”

The conversation meandered safely on till they had finished supper and were back in the ballroom. Here Sibylla’s world once more lost its security.

“Tell me,” said her partner. “Does my luck still hold?”

She looked at him uncertainly, not understanding him.

“This is an extra, isn’t it, and goes with the supper dance? Don’t tell me you’re engaged for it.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then—”

He held out his arm and she felt herself move within its span. His left hand took her right, now safely back in its glove, while her left hand, holding her fan and the gilt-edged programme card, rested lightly on his shoulder. It was a contact that she had had dozens of times before with dozens of other men. There was nothing in it to disquiet her, so why was she so disquieted? Why did her whole body seem to dissolve and change at the touch of his? Never before had she felt that a waltz could be dangerous. The lights, the coloured gowns, began to swim. She half-closed her eyes and felt herself float away to the tune of the Eton Boating Song, rocked in a sudden, overwhelming happiness.

Next day's rehearsal of *Patience* stood in relation to the dance very much as the next day's meet stands to a Hunt Ball. Everyone made it a point of honour to be there, though everyone was feeling jaded and badly in want of sleep.

Sibylla's head ached and the face that confronted her in her bedroom mirror was so pale that she thought of moistening the petals of the artificial rose she wore on her black gown and rubbing them on her cheeks. But the next moment she decided that it would be too big a risk—the colour might not look natural. Besides, it really did not matter what she looked like tonight, since he . . . her very thoughts seemed to break as he came into her mind and jangle together like cracked bells.

She sat down on her dressing-stool and leaned her head against her hand. Its throbbing was part of the rhythm of her heart—not altogether painful. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. Could she be in love? And could he be in love? He had said some astonishing things . . . did nice men speak to girls like that? Yet if he had felt in any degree what she had felt . . . after all, there is such a thing as love at first sight. And till now she had known nothing about it. She had thought she was falling in love with Philip Janaway . . . she nearly laughed.

Geoffrey Morison called after dinner, to walk up with them to Pelham Square. Sibylla wondered if he and Kitty were engaged. She thought they must be or were about to be—they had danced together half last night. But she no longer felt envious of Kitty—she had in her heart as good a secret as any of hers, a secret which she hoped some day she might, like Kitty, have to tell, but which at the moment she nursed without a future.

Then as she walked into the Faircloth drawing-room she saw him standing by the chimney-piece talking to Violet. The shock was almost physical. She felt her breath stop and her throat tighten, while the room swam in a pool of gaslight. The next minute she heard Georgie say:

“Hullo, there's that friend of Miss King's who was at the ball last night. I wonder what he's doing here.”

Mr. Roker had had one dance with Georgie, which had given her greater offence than gratification, since he might have had many more.

“So he is,” said Kitty. “Perhaps he's going to take Mr. Brooke's part.”

"I wonder."

Sibylla could not speak. The chances were too amazing and overwhelming. Suppose he really was going to take the part of Calverley, suppose he really was coming to all the rehearsals, suppose that she was to see him with ever-increasing frequency . . . She no longer kept her secret apart from time; it had become a fiery particle of both past and future, and the present moment was already a mass of flame.

She was not, however, to be allowed the protection of silence. Mrs. Faircloth had come up to greet them.

"Isn't it fortunate, girls?" she boomed—"they've found someone to take Mr. Brooke's place. A Mr. Roker—I believe he's very nice. Violet said you went in to supper with him last night, Sibylla."

"Yes, I did."

"He's a friend of the Kings. Daisy King brought him tonight. Mr. Foddington has already heard him sing and is quite in raptures. It really is a most fortunate chance. His wife's very delicate and has been ordered to spend the winter in Marlingate, so he's here till Easter, at the Marine Hotel."

A loud noise seemed to fill Sibylla's head, and the flame turned suddenly to water.

"Is Mr. Brooke here tonight?" asked Georgie.

"No. When he heard we'd got a substitute he decided not to come. I suppose he wasn't quite sure what we felt about him. I know it's very brave of him to volunteer, but, as Violet says, nothing will alter the fact that he's let us down." She tittered inverted commas for the slang. "Besides, it's rather setting himself up as more patriotic than the other men who don't feel they have to go to the front, though I'm sure they're just as brave as he is. It would be a *very* awkward thing if they all went off.—Are you quite well, Sibylla dear?"

"Yes, quite well, thank you."

"I thought you looked rather pale—just for a moment."

"Oh, no; it's only that I'm a bit tired after last night."

"Poor child, I expect you are; and here am I keeping you standing. Come along and I'll introduce you to Mr. Roker."

"I—I met him at the dance."

"Of course you did. What am I thinking of? The fact is that I'm tired too. It's really just as tiring to sit and watch you young people dancing till two or three in the morning as it is to dance oneself. I've told Mr. Foddington that we must stop punctually at ten o'clock."

She moved off, and Sibylla fell behind her sisters, till she stood at the back of the room, close to the wall. She did not want anyone—least of all one man—to see her or speak to her. She wanted to be alone, as much alone as was possible in that crowded room, in order that she might think.

He was married . . . so what had happened last night? Had she made a complete mistake about him and taken ordinary compliments, the common gallantry of a ball, for something special? Or was he that dreadful sort of man—unmet before by her, though reported by her friends—the married flirt, whom all nice girls avoided? Hitherto her contacts with married men had been overwhelmingly sedate—Mr. Buckrose, Mr. Morison, Mr. Kitson, all detached and impersonal or else carelessly friendly. But Kitty, she knew, had had more stirring experiences. Kitty was worldly wise, and Sibylla had despised her for it, convinced that such things don't happen “unless a girl does something to lead him on.” But now she would give anything in the world—except her confidence—for a share of Kitty's wisdom. How much or how little had happened last night? Had he been wicked or she been merely silly? . . . Probably both—she silly (making so much out of so little), he wicked (giving her even that little to make much of). She ought to have known that nice men don't talk to girls like that. She did know it—and yet she had allowed her mind to fill itself with him; and her body . . . the hot blood dyed her cheeks as red as the rose she wore.

The rehearsal had begun. Philip Janaway was singing his duet with Kitty:

*“Prithee, pretty maiden—prithee, tell me true  
(Hey, but I'm doleful, willow willow waly!) . . .”*

Kitty's sweet voice was weaving in and out of his; their voices and the music wove together an intolerable web of grief and longing in Sibylla's heart. She had ceased to blame herself, though she knew she was to blame; she had even ceased to question herself, to wonder why she had been so simple or why he had troubled to deceive her—as he certainly had, if only with silence. Her mind and heart were full of nothing but her loss . . . Hey, but I'm doleful, willow willow waly! . . . she could have wept, but stood upright and tense, her misery stabbed with a smile. She wanted to look as if she was enjoying herself—enjoying the music. She did not want anyone to speak to her. Once

she thought that she had inadvertently caught Philip Janaway's eye, and immediately cast hers down.

For some mysterious reason she could not bear the thought of him and the hopes he had once aroused. All the pride and happiness of his courtship were gone, and the memory of it had become a part of her loss. Oh, that she had never met this other man . . . then she would still be looking forward to meeting Philip Janaway, hoping that he would come and speak to her after his song! . . . If she had never known what real love was she would have been content with its decorous counterfeit. Thousands of girls, she imagined, married and were happy with no stronger feeling than she had had for Philip Janaway. But she could not do that now—she could never do it. Her new experience seemed to lie like a river of death between her and any tamer emotion.

The duet was over, and after a few words with Kitty and Mr. Foddington she saw young Janaway move in her direction. She immediately turned away and walked towards Violet, who was standing by the door; but before she could reach her she was intercepted. Her secondary fear had made her forget her primary one, and with a sudden chill at her heart she found herself looking into the handsome, smiling face she was more afraid of than any other face in the world.

"Good evening, Miss Landless."

"Oh, good evening."

She noticed with a sort of alarmed detachment that she had ended her greeting on a giggle.

"I hope you aren't very tired after the dance."

"Oh, no, not tired at all."

Why had she said that? It was quite untrue.

"Personally I had a most delightful evening. And this is even nicer. . . . I'm sure it's very good of Mr. Pym-Barrett and Mr. Foddington to let me join your company."

"But you're a perfect godsend to them—with Mr. Brooke going off like that. We were all at our wits' end about the part."

Her alarm had become animation and her voice was a little louder than natural.

"Well, it occurred to me, after what you'd told me, that I might be allowed to butt in, so I asked Miss King if I could come along with her this evening."

"I hear Mr. Foddington's in raptures about your voice."

"That's going a little far. I don't think I'm anything more than average, but if you're hard pressed for a singer even the average may be enough."

"I doubt if we're any of us much better than that."

"I thought the duet we've just heard exceptionally fine."

"Mr. Janaway and my sister have the best voices."

"So it's only right that they should have the best parts."

She was beginning to feel comforted by the banality of the conversation—it was part of the world she knew and for a moment she could forget both the bliss and the pain of the strange world she had visited last night.

"I believe this is very nearly our last rehearsal at Mrs. Faircloth's," she said brightly. "Mr. Foddington wants to get us all together soon at the Marine Hotel."

"That includes the male chorus, I suppose."

"Yes; so far he's been rehearsing the Dragoons separately. There isn't any room for them here. The Marine Hotel will be nice and convenient for you, won't it?"

"It certainly will, considering that I'm staying there."

Still he did not mention his wife, though now surely he had an opportunity. Sibylla, passing from assurance to recklessness, decided to do it for him.

"It'll be nice for Mrs. Roker too—not having you go out after dinner to the other end of the town."

"My wife always goes to bed very early, and has a maid to attend her, so I don't think she minds if I go out. But personally I'm glad there's to be a change. We haven't enough room here."

"No, it's rather hot and crowded, isn't it?"

She wondered if she had done wrong to mention Mrs. Roker. Yet why shouldn't she?—as long as she did it naturally. Perhaps she had not done it naturally. There seemed to her a queer, critical look in his eyes as he said:

"It's very stuffy. Can't we go into the next room? It looks much cooler in there."

Behind the crimson velvet portière the inner drawing-room displayed welcoming shadows, draped by potted palms over subdued lamplight. Members of the cast used it occasionally for resting in, but no one was there at the moment and Sibylla hesitated.



axis. He was quietly telling her about a time when he had sung the Nightmare Song from *Iolanthe* at some concert or other, when she interrupted him with:

“So you thought, after all, that you’d rather not sit in the middle of the front row.”

He looked at her in surprise. She had spoken almost fiercely, and it took him a little time to place her words. For a painful moment she feared he had forgotten his own last night, but after a pause he said:

“I think this is much nicer.”

“It’s closer. You said you wanted to be close.”

Her voice as she said that seemed to belong to someone else and her heart beat suffocatingly. She was terrified of what he would say next—or do. Would he get up and leave her? It was an infinite relief when he smiled. The next minute he said:

“Soon we shall be closer still.”

She could have fainted.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that when we come really to act our parts, we shall stand together arm in arm. Colonel Calverley and the Lady Saphir are supposed to get engaged at the end of Act Two.”

Was that all that he meant? She could not believe it. She said bitterly:

“We were closer than that when we waltzed together last night.”

“Yes, those were wonderful waltzes. I hope we shall have some more together before long.”

“I doubt if there’ll be another ball this winter.”

“Never mind about balls. When the rehearsals are at the Marine Hotel, you and I may be able to slip away together and practise our steps somewhere away from the rest. I shall be very disappointed if we can’t do that. I want to feel you close to me again.”

So overpowering was the conflict of shame and bliss that the entrance at that moment of Violet Faircloth was almost a deliverance.

“There you are, Sibylla! We couldn’t think where you’d got to. Didn’t you hear Mr. Foddington asking for you?”

“I apologize,” said Roker. “It was I who suggested to Miss Landless that we should come and sit in here. I’m afraid I’ve been yarning away to her about my Gilbert and Sullivan performances, so that she hasn’t been able to hear any voice but my own. I’m sorry.”

“Well, Mr. Foddington wants to take us through the Act One

Finale. Then, thank goodness, we're breaking up. I don't know what you feel, but I'm tired out."

"I do feel rather tired," said Sibylla.

Indeed tired was a poor word to describe the exhaustion she felt as she walked back into the chatter and gaslight of the main drawing-room. She opened her score and the notes seemed to dance before her eyes so that she could hardly read them. What would happen when the time came for her to sing . . . ?

*"I hear the soft note of the echoing voice  
Of an old, old love, long dead . . ."*

She had opened her mouth, but all she could hear was John Roker singing beside her.

*"It whispers my sorrowing heart 'rejoice,'  
For the last sad tear is shed . . ."*

She was singing now, if that voice was really her own.

*"The pain that is all but a pleasure will change  
For the pleasure that's all but pain,  
And never, oh never, this heart will range  
From that old, old love again!"*

She realized to her amazement that she was singing better than she had ever sung before. The over-familiar, inappropriate words seemed to come straight from her heart, and to fill her voice with new depths and riches. She might be exhausted, yet it was exhaustion lifted almost into ecstasy by a queer sense of renewal, as if a new Sibylla had been born in that little shadowy place—a Sibylla who cared nothing for the conventions or the common hopes of the girl she had been an hour ago and therefore could face a life in which both equally were dead.

#### IV

AS the new year woke and spread itself in wintry lights of gold and silver on the sea, Marlingate began to feel more at ease about the war which was being waged in summer at the other end of the world. Things were going very much better in South Africa; troops

from every part of the Empire were pouring into Cape Town, and soon the Imperial Yeomanry would be out there to teach those miserable Boers that a good beginning may well lead to a bad end.

A great wave of patriotism was sweeping the country—casting up recruiting meetings, funds for soldiers' families, popular songs, pictures by R. Caton Woodville and columns from special war-correspondents.

Colonel Landless began to feel cheerful again. It is true that so far there had been no startling reversal of the catastrophes of December, no definite payment of the debt to glory incurred in Natal or Cape Colony. But he was confident that under Lord Roberts's generalship all this would come to pass. Now that the fools had been got rid of—the fools who had under-rated their foe—and Roberts and Kitchener put in command, it could not be very long before the Soldiers of the Queen triumphed over her enemies.

Meanwhile it was good to find the country waking up. He had been asked to speak at the monster recruiting meeting which was to be held in the Concert Hall at the end of January, and for the rest of the month he was busy preparing and rehearsing for this event. Not one of his daughters, obsessed by her own performance in that same Concert Hall a month later, worked harder at her piano than he worked at his writing-table, or even at his dressing-room mirror—studying the very gestures that were to put the young men of Marlingate into khaki and send them thousands of miles across the sea.

As it happened, his daughters were also planning for the same event, for it had been considered opportune by the promoters to have a collection for the Absent-minded Beggar Fund and Kitty had been asked to sing Rudyard Kipling's famous song, specially written for such an occasion. After the song she and certain other young ladies of Marlingate were to collect the money themselves in tambourines, while the Marlingate Municipal Band played patriotic airs.

In the circumstances it was not perhaps surprising that she should regard the event as social rather than military.

"I shall have to get a new dress. My crimson simply won't do again—everyone in Marlingate knows it by heart."

"How will you manage to pay for it?" asked Georgina. "You haven't paid Miss Gamble for your new ball-dress yet."

"I'll give her something on account and a lot of blarney. Old Gamble'll do anything for me if I get her in the right mood."

"I can lend you two pounds if you like," said Sibylla. "I've saved

nearly that on my new coat and skirt. Pinckney's only charging four guineas."

"Thanks, Sibylla; you're a brick," said Kitty. "I shan't say it won't make things easier and I'll repay you faithfully when I get next quarter's money."

She thought to herself: It's improved Sibylla, getting mashed on that Roker man—shaken her up and made her much more amiable. Mercifully she doesn't want a new dress for the part. He must have told her he likes her best in that rosy thing of hers. She wears it whenever she gets a chance.

Aloud she said:

"What a winter we've had! I was afraid the war might have made things dull, but it seems to have done just the opposite. That *Patience* Ball was the best ball we've ever had down here, and the rehearsals are the greatest fun, especially now they're at the hotel. And then on the top of it all there's this meeting . . . I wonder if Mrs. Lambert's nephew will really come and speak at it."

"Of course he's coming," said Georgie. "He's on the bills. I saw one up in Bond's this morning. Captain Hugh Spellman—that's the name, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's the name, and personally I shall be extremely glad to see him. After all these months of war it will be nice to meet somebody actually in uniform."

"Will it be khaki or full-dress?"

"Oh, khaki, I expect, as it's a recruiting meeting. What are you smiling at, Sibylla?"

Sibylla started.

"Oh, nothing. . . . I didn't know I was smiling."

To none of the older Landless girls did the two big occasions at the Concert Hall bring higher expectations than to their little sister. Myra was as excited about the meeting as she was about the opera, and had equally been promised that she should go to it. Of the two, no doubt, the opera was the more thrilling, but the meeting was nearer and for some time occulted the remoter event.

The new noisy tide of patriotism had found no one readier to swim and shout in it than little Myra Landless. She wore a Union Jack in her buttonhole, pinned button pictures of Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener to her hat and had spent a shilling, given her for being

(most unexpectedly) a good girl when she had a tooth out, on a cabinet photograph of Colonel Baden-Powell in a red, white and blue frame. She knew and sang all the patriotic songs that jangled off the barrel-organs of Fish Street and High Street or wove themselves more austere into the intervals between "Raymond," "Light Cavalry," and "Golden and Silver" in the programmes of the Municipal Band. . . . "Oh, Myra, do shut up" from her sisters, or from Rose: "Crofton's just looked in to say that Madam's resting and wants to be quiet" were two poles of an effort to ride the storm of "Dolly Gray," "Bluebell," "Soldiers of the Queen," "The Absent-minded Beggar" and "The British Grenadier," all sounding very much alike as rendered on a comb and a piece of tissue paper.

Anyway, life once more was set to a cheerful military tune and no longer disturbed by bewildering adagios. She was still further comforted by her father's restored good-humour and thrilled by his coming performance at the meeting, though not nearly to the extent that she was thrilled by Kitty's part in the affair. As usual Kitty had captured her imagination. Kitty would look prettier and sing more sweetly and collect more money in her little tambourine than anyone else in the town.

When anticipation passed into realization, Kitty's ascendancy was both confirmed and increased. Myra had never before attended a public meeting, but even so she could not help feeling a certain anxiety on her father's behalf and a doubt as to whether he was really making such a very brilliant speech. There seemed to be such very long pauses between his words—pauses that were filled either by his own coughings and throat-clearings or those of the audience—and sometimes he did not seem to know what to say next and once he had got his notes mixed up and had looked as if he would never be able to go on again. At the end, however, everybody clapped and stamped most enthusiastically, though Myra could not be sure if the relief she undoubtedly felt was due to the speech's reception or to the fact that it had at last come to an end.

The next speaker was Captain Hugh Spellman, a soldier who had actually been to the front. He had been out in South Africa with his regiment when the war started and would still be there if he had not fallen ill with malaria and been invalided home. Myra had heard all this from Kitty, who had already met him at tea in his aunt's house. Kitty did not agree with her that it would have been much nicer if

he had been wounded, and in fact had called her a heartless little beast. But Myra infinitely preferred a wounded hero to an invalid one, and was pleasantly surprised to find that Captain Spellman did not look like an invalid at all—he was neither pale nor languid, nor did he speak in a drooping die-away voice, like Mother when she had a headache. On the contrary, he looked both healthy and handsome in his khaki uniform, and made what Colonel Landless afterwards described as “a good fighting speech,” in a voice that sent echoes to wander and whisper among the great gasoliers that hung like boughs of golden oranges from the roof of the hall.

Good as his speech was, Myra was glad when it ended, because she had grown tired of sitting still and was impatient for Kitty’s turn to come. Now at last the orchestra—eight picked musicians from the Municipal Band that performed every morning in the Marine Gardens and every afternoon in the Town Park—struck up “The Absent-minded Beggar,” and the moorland scene, which had given a somewhat bleak setting to the speakers hitherto, rolled up into the flies, revealing a Dutch landscape, against which the young ladies of Marlingate, each holding a tambourine, stood with Kitty in their midst, all ready to burst into song.

Kitty was wearing her new green dress, trimmed with the same fur as her little hat, which was called a toque. She came forward, bowed and smiled, and looked so pretty that for a moment Myra pretended she was Ivy Betersden, though Ivy was normally a contemporary of her own. Then, holding her music gracefully in her kid-gloved hands, she lifted the voice that made Myra think of a bird and a flute.

*“When you’ve shouted Rule Britannia, when you’ve sung God Save the Queen,  
When you’ve finished killing Kruger with your mouth,  
Will you kindly drop a shilling in my little tambourine  
For a gentleman in khaki ordered south?”*

Myra knew all Kitty’s songs by heart—“Rhoda had a Pagoda”—“Have you forgotten, love, so soon?”—“Dresden China”—“The Gay Tom-tit” and, of course, the *Patience* songs . . . but she had never liked any so much as “The Absent-minded Beggar.” It made extraordinary things happen to her body—her heart thudded like marching feet while her skin crept and her breath grew thick and heavy in her

throat. Today all this happened more rapturously than ever, for Kitty was singing with a chorus and the accompaniment of the Municipal Band—a source of deep excitement in itself. When, at the end of the song, the young ladies, still singing, came down the steps at the side of the platform and, led by Kitty, went to and fro among the audience with their tambourines, Myra thought she knew what was meant by fainting. The hall, the people and the gasoliers all seemed to swim together in a stormy lake, and it was only the sudden appearance under her nose of a tambourine (held disappointingly by Miss Dolly Morison and not by Kitty) which restored her to the consciousness that she held a shilling which must now be handed over. Mercifully for the effort involved it was not her own, but one of her mother's specially given her to bestow.

"Duke's son, cook's son, son of a hundred kings . . ." sang the girls—a little raggedly, it must be confessed, now that they were scattered among the audience, impeded by rows of chairs, involved in fumblings with purses and even occasionally asked for change. Kitty never forgot to smile and trip, but most of her friends wore a harassed expression by the time they were all back on the platform—some of them had trodden on people's feet and look apologetic and some had trodden on their own skirts and looked annoyed as they glanced surreptitiously at torn gathers and dusty hems. However, soon all were smiling again as the band struck up "God Save the Queen," the audience rose and the proceedings ended in fervour and out of tune.

At last the great occasion was over, and Myra in a mazy dream walked out with Rose, while Mrs. Landless stayed behind to talk to some of her neighbours. In the foyer, moving slowly with the crowd, a scent of fur and violets made her aware of Kitty close at hand, and some at least of her worshipping delight spilled over.

"Oh, Kitty, I did love it so—you looked so smart and nice and you sang so—so—excitingly."

Kitty seemed pleased and her laugh had the same sort of exciting quality as her song.

"Glad you enjoyed it, kid. And look here, if you see Mother you might tell her that I'm going back to tea with Mrs. Lambert—she's just asked me."

Myra was disappointed that Kitty was not coming home to tea.

"That's twice she's been to tea with her," said Rose, as they walked up the High Street, "twice since he's been there."

"Since who's been there?"

"That Captain Spellman, of course. It's a case, if you ask me."

"A case of what?"

"Of love at first sight," said Rose.

"I thought you said you were sure she was going to marry Mr. Morison."

"So I was—at one time. But what chance has an ordinary man got against a uniform?"

"I like Captain Spellman's uniform," said Myra. "I think khaki's nice. Rose, would you like your young man to wear khaki?"

Rose's young man was Jim Brazier, the butcher's boy, and a great source of interest to Myra.

"At that I shouldn't," said Rose emphatically, "and I hope no one'll put such ideas into his head."

"Why not? He'd look awfully nice. Rose, Ivy Betherdsden has married a gentleman in khaki."

"Has she, then?"

"Yes; his name is Captain Lionel de Caesar, and they've got a dear little baby already."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Ivy's so excited about it. She's only ten, you know. Would you like me to tell you how she found out it had come?"

"Not now, thanks," said Rose quite shortly. "I think that's the 'bus coming up the street and we'd better jump on as we're so late."

For the first time she did not seem to want to hear about Ivy Betherdsden.

The meeting proved a great success. That is to say the speeches and singing had such an effect on the townspeople of Marlingate that no less than a dozen of them enlisted in the forces of the Crown. Young Jim Brazier was one, though none of the speakers or singers could claim any credit for him, as he had been busy on his round all that afternoon and far away from the Concert Hall.

Myra was surprised at Rose's distress. Certainly she had said she did not want to see him in khaki, but it seemed incredible that she should be quite insensible of the honour done her as his sweetheart.

"Rose, you'll be like Dolly Gray . . ."

"Thanks," said Rose in a bitter voice unlike her own.

Myra tried in vain to persuade her to take up a heroic attitude and

had to console herself by sending off Ivy Betherdsen's husband to the Front. Her name was of course now de Caesar—Lady de Caesar, in fact—but Myra kept the Betherdsen in reserve, feeling that she might soon want to make her single again. Single people were much more interesting than married people, except in war-time, when a glamour of parting descended on the latter, a glamour which occasionally reached the heights of bereavement. There was a lady staying at the Marine Hotel who had actually lost her husband at the Front. Myra had had her pointed out to her, a tall, trailing figure in widow's weeds, and Sibylla had explained to her how she would wear those for a year and a day, and then black and white for several months, before she finally shed her grief in violet. Captain de Caesar's career was not likely to be a long one.

On the fifteenth of February the siege of Kimberley was raised, and Marlingate—in common with the rest of the country—rang bells, waved flags and shouted its relief. Highfield House was given a whole holiday and Colonel Landless opened a bottle of champagne, of which Myra was allowed a prickling mouthful. In the evening a crowd of fishermen and some very rough people from the Old Town surged noisily past Monypenny Crescent; they were shouting and singing and waving Union Jacks, and Myra's first attitude was one of patriotic approval. But when she heard her mother say that they were almost certainly going to attack the pro-Boer's house, she began to feel vaguely frightened. She loathed and despised the pro-Boer, of course, but it frightened her to think that one person could be attacked by so many, and so near her own home too—she could hear the crowd booing and roaring in Becket Grove and soon there was a terrific crash which her mother said was breaking glass.

“Oh, Mother, do you think they're breaking the windows?”

“I expect so,” said her mother calmly; “he's had the shutters up for months, but that won't stop them.”

“I expect they'll burn the house down,” said Georgina. But that idea frightened Myra so much that her mother and sisters all had to tell her they were quite sure the crowd would do no such thing; and indeed the next minute the mounted police could be heard galloping up the hill to save the wretched pro-Boer from the fate that even Myra thought he deserved. Soon everything was quiet except for stray snatches of “The Absent-minded Beggar” and “God Save the Queen,” coming not from Becket Grove but more distantly from Fish Street

and High Street. The Old Town looked very red from Myra's bedroom window that night, but it was not on fire, save with patriotism and drink.

A few days later another patriotic but less sinister crowd assembled. It was to bid farewell to the dozen heroes who were now definitely setting out on their way to glory. Myra had been grievously disappointed when her mother said she was on no account to go anywhere near the station.

"There's sure to be a lot of people from the Old Town, and they'll be very rough and noisy. You might be knocked down—or you might catch something."

"Mother . . ." the word came out gulping queerly on a sob. "I must go. The Mayor and Corporation are going to see them off—and the Mu-Municipal Band."

"I can't help that, dear. It's quite unsuitable for a little girl like you to go anywhere near such a crowd. I don't want anyone to go from this house. Besides, you have to be at school."

"I haven't—it's on Saturday."

That was the bitterest part of all—that she was able to go, but Mother would not let her. However, her affairs showed a sudden and most unexpected improvement when Rose, on hearing about them, said quite angrily:

"Oh, no one's going from this house, are they? Well, I'll tell you one thing—I'm going, and if you like you can come too."

"Oh, Rose . . ."

"You're not to tell your mother, mind."

"How can I help telling her?"

Myra thought mournfully of the adventure with Kitty at French Landing.

"Don't be such a muff," said Rose. "There's no need for you to say anything about it. All you've got to do is to ask if you and me can go for a walk up Cuckoo Hill on Saturday morning. Then we can cut over to the station by Spitalman's Down."

"But suppose she says you can't go and I must have Sibylla or Kitty instead?"

"You can't have them. They're rehearsing all day on Saturday—I know that for certain. The thing comes on in ten days' time, and they haven't a minute to spare."

Myra was deeply and terribly excited. Never before had she engaged in anything approaching a conspiracy. The affair with Kitty had been quite unexpected and spontaneous on her side. But now she was involved in a deliberately secret plan—a deliberately wicked plan, perhaps. The idea of wickedness supported her, and to it, no doubt, Rose owed the fact that she was not betrayed by her accomplice. Myra, gloating silently over the situation, kept her mouth shut on it until Saturday morning; and when at breakfast she asked if she might go for a walk on Cuckoo Hill, Mrs. Landless saw nothing remarkable either in the request or in the way in which it was made. Her youngest daughter's desires were always so intense that no suspicion was aroused by her excitement and anxiety over such a modest treat.

Of course it was a long way round to the station by Cuckoo Hill. Instead of simply going down High Street and turning up Station Road, they started off in the opposite direction, towards the country. A cart track took them along the edge of Old Rumble Woods to a queer, rather unpleasant little farm, with its roofs all turned yellow by the sea-wind and its sheltering thicket of trees flattened and matted by that same wind into a sinister denseness. Myra had always felt a little afraid of Old Rumble Farm and reluctant to pass it on the excursions she made fairly often with Rose or her sisters to the top of Cuckoo Hill. Today she hurried past the outbuildings with averted face, and almost jumped the stile that led to the open down. A strong, salt wind was blowing, and after a time she began to hear shreds of music in its angry voice.

"That's the band," said Rose. "They must be starting."

Old Rumble Farm lay far behind them now. They were out on the bare slope of Cuckoo Hill, looking down at Marlingate with its smoking roofs and its two main streets like roads in a toy town. The music seemed to rise from it with the chimney-smoke.

"We must hurry," cried Rose. "The procession's going down High Street."

She began to run, so fast that Myra had difficulty in keeping up with her. Rose had been very odd and abrupt in her manner during the last few days, and this morning she was totally unlike herself—refusing to talk about Jim Brazier, even to tell Myra if he had said good-bye to her on her evening out.

"I don't care if he never comes back," she remarked once or twice—certainly most unlike Dolly Gray.

But even if she took no interest in his return, she was determined to see him go.

"Hurry up, or we'll be late," she called to the panting Myra. Her cheeks seemed pinker than ever today, a hard, unnatural pink, unlike her name. "Hurry up," she repeated. "I can see the procession now; they're in High Street—another ten minutes and they'll be in Station Road."

Mercifully the way was all down-hill, and soon they were among the scattered houses of a new road that had crept out of the town, and the music of the band was no longer a distant plaint and throb, but a braying, thumping Sousa march. Myra could see the procession coming slowly up Station Road, through ranks of people, while in the station yard was a crowd so big and dense that it looked like solid darkness.

She felt quite relieved when Rose said:

"We won't go down there; we'll see better from the bridge."

A street of houses crossed the railway by a bridge just above the station, and soon they were both leaning over the parapet, looking down on the crowd below.

"How will they ever get through to the train?"

It certainly looked impossible, for the heads of the people were packed as close as buns on a baker's tray. But the next minute six mounted police came cantering up, and before them the crowd split open in a terrifying way—terrifying because you knew that the lane which appeared had been cut through people, forced back by terror of the trampling hoofs to trample in their turn on other people packed and crushed behind them. A kind of groan mingled with the crowd's roar, and though it would be going too far to say that Myra realized her mother had been right in forbidding her to go to the station, she certainly felt relieved that she was not where she would have been if she had been free to do exactly as she liked.

After the mounted police came the Mayor and Corporation, and then the band, now playing "The Absent-minded Beggar." The beloved tune rose above the noise of the crowd and Myra's skin shuddered with the adventures of her spirit. She watched the Mayor and Aldermen of Marlingate alight from their carriages, looking very dramatic and unlike their own private lives. Even if she had not been so high on the bridge above them, she would never have recognized Mr. Lewnes the coal-merchant in Zuriel Place, Mr. Bolt who ran a

boarding-house on the Coney Banks or any of the High Street shopkeepers who bowed so politely to her mother when she paid the books on Monday. As they strutted solemnly behind the two mace-bearers on to the platform, they looked like beings from another world—the world of history, of Gilbert and Sullivan, of Ivy Betherston. Meanwhile the band had established itself near the entrance to the booking-hall and continued to play gloriously.

*“Duke’s son, cook’s son, son of a hundred kings . . .”*

A haze of excitement danced over Myra’s eyes as she hung over the parapet, gazing down into the station yard, where new and even more wonderful things had begun to happen.

“Rose—Rose!—look! What are they doing?”

It seemed as if the recruits were being dragged out of the carriages in which they had driven up. The crowd was cheering now—cheering and singing. Those near the band were singing “The Absent-minded Beggar,” while from the rest rose cheers that were almost screams. The huge, solid-looking mass, which had re-formed itself behind the Mayor, seemed now in a commotion, surging like the sea, and through it—most perilously—Myra could see tiny figures being carried shoulder-high, as on the top of a wave.

“Rose—Rose, look what they’re doing! They’re carrying them! Oh, Rose, which is Jim?”

But Rose made no answer, and looking round at her Myra saw to her astonishment and horror that she was crying. Her elbow was on the parapet and her face, propped on her hand, was half hidden by a large, crumpled handkerchief. But Myra could see the corner of her mouth quivering and struggling as the tears ran into it.

“Rose! . . .”

She was startled—scandalized. . . . She had never seen a grown-up person cry, and the sight, breaking suddenly into such a moment, shocked her profoundly. Dolly Gray and her musical tears were carried away in a gust of realism.

“Rose! . . .”

There was the edge of a sob in Myra’s voice.

“Oh, be quiet, can’t you!” cried Rose angrily.

She took away her handkerchief from swimming, furious eyes which glared round at the other people on the bridge.

“Come—let’s be off! I’ve had enough of this.”

"But, Rose . . ."

"Don't be a little fool. There's nothing more to see. They're g-gone."

She lifted her handkerchief to her face again and pushed her way through the crowd into the empty dreariness of the road behind them. Myra followed her, protesting loudly. She was sure that there was still a great deal more to see. But Rose would not wait, and Myra, who never in her life had been out of doors alone, dared not stay without her. The strains of "The Absent-minded Beggar" mocked her for a bitter half-mile.

"Rose—don't go so fast."

Rose was hurrying away at an even greater speed than she had come. She was actually running now, her handkerchief still held to her face, her shabby little hat on one side, her flowery print skirts making a summer below the winter of her serge coat.

"Rose, stop! I can't run any more."

Rose stopped—perhaps she realized that she and her charge must assemble some decorum before they arrived at Monypenny Crescent.

"Rose, can't we go back?"

"Go back! Not on your life—not with all those people staring at me."

"They weren't staring at you. They were staring at the soldiers."

"That's what you think. I tell you I saw different. There was that Mrs. Mountain from Bozzum Square—over behind us by the steps she was, and gloating, I dare say."

They were beyond the houses now, on an open part of the down, dotted here and there with a few tamarisks blown like green flames into the slant of the wind, which then suddenly brought a burst of cheering.

"Oh, Rose, I can't bear not to see them. Do please let us go back. Why, we came here on purpose to see them."

But Rose shook her head and sat down under a tamarisk tree.

"I've seen all I want to, thanks."

"Did you see Jim?—I didn't."

"Yes, I saw him—the miserable coward."

This seemed an extraordinary reproach for one of the heroes of the day, and Myra gaped at her.

"He can't be a coward if he's going to the Front."

"That's why he's going to the Front—because he's a coward. You

mark my words—he's a miserable coward. He's afraid—that's what he is—afraid of what people will say—afraid to stand by me——”

And suddenly she began to cry again, this time without restraint, for there was nobody to see her but the bewildered and frightened little girl, who in a fascination of horror watched her body heave and contract with sobs, while from her mouth, wide open like a child's, came great hoarse bellowings.

“Stop! Oh, Rose, do stop!” cried Myra once again, but with a different meaning.

She herself was too frightened to cry. She could only stand and stare at the spectacle before her. After a time Rose fell sideways on the ground and began to beat it with her fists and kick it with her feet. Then suddenly she sat up and smiled.

“There, I feel better! We ought to think of getting home.”

She put her hat straight and smoothed her dress, but her face was all flushed and blubbered, and queerly striped as if her tears had washed away the colour of her cheeks. Myra stared at her without speaking.

“I expect I look a sight. I'll slip in at the back door and let you go in by yourself at the front. Don't wear a face like that, though, or your mother will ask questions.”

## V

“WELL, dear, had a nice walk?” That was the only question her mother asked as Myra crept in at the front door, still feeling as if her legs were made of paper.

Luckily she did not trouble about an answer—her mind was far too full of “the girls” being kept late at their rehearsal.

“I think we'd better get started without them. Your father never can bear the meat to be over-done. Ring the bell, Myra, that's a good little girl, and I'll tell Crofton we won't wait for the young ladies.”

It was also fortunate that during the meal the same anxieties made her unobservant of her daughter's want of appetite. Mutton cutlets and treacle sponge were both favourites with Myra, but only the kitchen commented on the amount of each that went out on her plate. Mrs. Landless was preoccupied with other things.

“I shall feel thankful when it's all over. These rehearsals have really become a nuisance—making everyone so unpunctual. I wonder

if they've gone to have lunch at Brown's—not that you can get much there except meat pies, but they may have thought they hadn't time to come home."

"I don't like the idea of my daughters wandering loose about the town," said Colonel Landless peevishly.

"Oh, they're not really loose, dear: they've got Violet Faircloth with them and the Morison girls—and, I believe, here they are!"

The front door had opened and shut and the next minute Sibylla and Georgina came into the dining-room.

"So sorry we're late, Mother, but Mr. Foddington insisted on our getting through the first act before lunch, and the 'bus had left just before we came out, so we've had to walk all the way home."

"Where's Kitty?" asked Colonel and Mrs. Landless with one voice.

The two girls looked at each other and then at their parents.

"She's stayed to have lunch at the Marine Hotel," said Sibylla.

"At the Marine Hotel!—lunch!—who with?"

"With Captain Spellman."

The Colonel's face suffused, while his wife's turned paler. Again they spoke together, but not this time in the same words.

"Not alone with Captain Spellman!"—"What's he doing down here again?"—"What an extraordinary thing to do!"—"Surely they aren't lunching together without a chaperone—you girls should have stayed with them."

"Captain Spellman said he was going to ring up Mrs. Lambert and ask her to join them. No doubt he'd have rung you up too if this house had been on the telephone. If it had we might all have stayed, but we were obliged to come home and let you know what was happening."

The absence of a telephone, now coming into general use, had for some months been a grievance with the Landless girls.

"That's all very well," said their father, "but I'm not going to have my house made a pandemonium of shouting and ringing just so that you girls can run about with young men as much as you please. Lunch at the Marine Hotel!—I never heard of such a thing. I'm surprised at the young fellow. I thought he knew better than that."

"I've told you, Father—he's getting his aunt to join them."

"But they'll be alone together till she comes—you girls should have waited . . . and what's he doing down here, anyhow? I thought he was with his regiment."

"He's on leave—forty-eight hours' leave; and he thought he'd like to come and watch a rehearsal."

"Why on earth should he want to do that?"

Nobody attempted to answer him.

Lunch was an uncomfortable meal that mercifully had to be eaten quickly. Sibylla and Georgina were soon jogging their way back to the Marine Hotel in the High Street 'bus, through the defile of the high pavements, raised to protect the houses and shop-windows from equinoctial tides, which in days of old had sometimes brought the sea as far into the town as Zuriel Place.

Violet Faircloth was already in the 'bus when they entered it, established in what was always considered the best seat—close to the near-side front window, from which you could look out at the horses and the street instead of having to stare at the passengers opposite. Sibylla felt obliged to go and sit beside her, leaving Georgie near the door. She would greatly have preferred to sit alone with her thoughts, dreaming through the coloured mile of houses till the journey's end. But Violet gave her a beckoning look and she could not pretend she had not seen it.

"Hullo," said Violet. "Had a great rush?"

"Yes, rather."

"Well, you're better off than me. I got home after you, of course, and had to leave earlier. What did your father and mother say about Kitty and Captain Spellman?"

"They weren't at all pleased."

"Naturally they wouldn't be. I wonder if Mrs. Lambert really joined them."

"She surely would, when he asked her like that."

"*When* he asked her?—my point is *if* he asked her."

"But he went to telephone—I saw him go."

"Oh, yes; but you never saw him telephone. I don't suppose he really wanted a gooseberry, so he only just pretended to ask her. When we see him again we'll be told she couldn't come."

"I don't see why you should say that."

Sibylla spoke irritably. For some reason it annoyed her to hear Violet make the worst of Kitty's escapade.

"Well, my dear, I'm only going by what I see, and I must say things look pretty odd."

"How—odd?"

"Well, he hasn't known her more than about three weeks, or met her more than half a dozen times. But for that I'd say that perhaps he meant to propose to her at lunch. However, it can't be that."

"Why not?—there's such a thing as love at first sight."

"I don't believe there is—not the kind that lasts."

"Shakespeare believed in it, anyway, and—and—lots of other writers."

"Oh, writers—yes. What would they do without it? But in real life a man likes to feel his way, and a woman too, if she's got any dignity or self-respect."

Sibylla's annoyance grew. She did not normally take Kitty's part against her detractors, but Violet's criticisms today seemed to her spiteful and ignorant.

"I don't see why you need make the worst of it, the way you're doing. We don't really know what's happened. Mrs. Lambert may be with them all the time—I feel pretty sure that she is. After all, Captain Spellman's much more a man of the world than the sort of man one usually meets down here and he wouldn't be likely to do anything really compromising."

"I'm sure I hope not." There was a ring of annoyance in Violet's voice now. "We don't want the *Patience* cast more talked about than it is already."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

Violet turned in her seat and her large pale eyes bored at Sibylla through her veil.

"You know what I mean."

Sibylla knew. With a cold sense of shock her mind leaped at understanding. But at the same time every self-preserving instinct rose in denial.

"I don't. I haven't the faintest idea."

"Well, I mean you and Mr. Roker."

Another cold shock, this time freezing her to perfect calm.

"You know nothing whatever about me and Mr. Roker. There's nothing to know."

"I don't suppose there is," said Violet cruelly, "but people are talking about you all the same."

Shuddering under her thick, warm clothes, she wanted to ask: "What are they saying?" Instead she replied:

"I should have thought they might find something better to do with their time."

"No doubt. But people will gossip in a town like this if you give them anything to go upon; and I must say, my dear, that you've been rather indiscreet."

"How?—in wh-what way?"

"Well, always going off alone with him like that during rehearsals."

"We only go to practise our steps."

"What steps?—you aren't doing a hornpipe together during the opera, are you? Why should you want to practise any steps?"

Sibylla had assembled her defences.

"We're both very fond of waltzing. We found that out at the *Patience* Ball. And now we sometimes go and take a turn in the ballroom when we're not wanted on the stage. It's more fun than just sitting about and watching the others."

"Really, Sibylla, you surprise me. To hear you talk one would think you'd no idea at all of what's what. A turn in the ballroom . . . you don't mention that at night the ballroom's pitch dark."

"It isn't. There's a bright light streaming in from the passage."

"And do you waltz the whole time? It must be very dull without any music."

"Sometimes we sit and talk."

"In the dark?"

"I tell you it isn't dark."

"When the door's open—but is it always open?"

"It is," said Sibylla furiously, "always."

Violet gave a low, contemptuous laugh.

"Yes, he's careful. That's the sort of man he is. Daisy King was telling me."

"Telling you what?"

Fear once more had succeeded vexation.

"That he's the sort of man who likes to flirt with girls, but never means anything serious. He's very fond of his wife really, and anyway she's got the money. He did exactly the same sort of thing when he was out at Mentone—took up with some girl or other in the hotel, got her talked about and made her cheap, and then went off. So you'd really better take care, my dear."

"I know how to look after myself, thank you."

"I don't believe you do. Though I must say I never thought you were the sort of girl who'd flirt with a married man."

"I'm not flirting."

"Heavens! You don't mean to say you think he's serious?"

Sibylla could have screamed in her agony.

"No, of course not. But we're not flirting, either. We're friends."

"I don't see how a girl can possibly be friends with a married man—with any sort of man, for that matter. I don't believe in platonic friendship any more than I believe in love at first sight."

"Well, I believe in both," said Sibylla.

Their voices had now risen even above the noise made by untyred wheels on a cobbled street. The other passengers were beginning to stare at them and both girls fell silent, blushing behind their veils.

Sibylla felt almost suffocated with anger and distress—anger against Violet combined with an impersonal anger in defence of a situation that had become as dear as life itself, distress caused by the sudden violence with which she had been made to face conventions and prohibitions that for weeks she had managed to ignore. People were talking, were they? . . . Oh, death-knell to the aspirations of "the girl of the period"—tocsin that summoned her elders to bind and frustrate. People were talking about her; they were talking about Kitty. Her father would never endure to hear two of his daughters talked about. Already he was restive—he would become active; he would use his parental authority to forbid. Her anger spread to Kitty too, for Kitty would double the measure of her father's wrath, already formidable enough as a single portion. She was trembling with anger rather than misery when the 'bus stopped at the bottom of High Street.

The Marine Hotel dominated the Marine Parade, midway between the mouths of High Street and Fish Street—a high, wide, stuccoed building that had once been a part of Marlingate's fashion and prosperity. Now its glories were diminished with the town's, though some said its depression was due to the building of a set of public rooms, which it hired out for meetings, rehearsals, dances not ambitious enough for the Assembly Room or concerts too modest for the Concert Hall. These rooms were said by the inhabitants of New Marlingate to have cheapened it indescribably, though the proprietors may have gleaned some comfort from the fact that they were always in demand and brought in a regular income when the lounges and pillared

dining-room gaped round a lonely, handful of guests and upstairs the huge, high bedrooms with their brass bedsteads and wallpaper designs of tortured chrysanthemums held only the empty light and music of the sea.

The room devoted to the rehearsals of *Patience* was called the Masonic Room, owing to its chief function as the disporting-place of Marlingate's Freemasons. It was exceptionally full that afternoon; for the whole company was assembled, including the socially-impossible male chorus, which, aware of its drawbacks, formed a separate group at one end of the room. They had not attended the morning rehearsal, having been busy at their various low occupations in the town, so they looked very much less jaded than the other performers, who were already sick of their own efforts combined with the double journey to and from their luncheons.

The ladies and gentlemen of Marlingate had been rehearsing together for four and a half months, and the performance had reached that stage when, though still very imperfect, it was already stale. Mr. Foddington and Mr. Pym-Barrett could both have wished for more frequent rehearsals over a shorter period; but this they knew was impossible. Mrs. Faircloth's drawing-room could not be disorganized oftener than once a week, and the hiring of the Masonic Room was conditioned by its expenses and by the other claims upon it. They hoped for the best, but wished today that the company did not already look so weary of its endeavours. There were only two cheerful faces in the room—those of Kitty Landless and Captain Spellman, who was not in the cast at all.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please take your places for the opening chorus of Act Two.”

As she walked past Kitty, Violet Faircloth murmured:

“Has Mrs. Lambert gone home?”

“She didn't come—she had people for lunch.”

“Then what did you do?—have lunch with him alone?”

Kitty smiled sweetly.

“Alone except for about forty other people in the dining-room.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” pleaded Mr. Foddington, rapping the piano with his baton.

Violet moved on, with a triumphant glance over her shoulder at Sibylla, who had heard everything, as she had been meant to hear.

At that moment she really hated Violet. It was useless for what

was left of her reason to point out that Violet had only revealed, not created, the situation; that she should, in fact, be grateful to her for the warning. She was insensitive to reason, her mind still smarting with Violet's phrases: "He's the sort of man who likes to flirt with girls . . . took up with some girl in the hotel made her cheap . . . You don't mean to say you think he's serious. . . ." Something in her mind was scratching over those words again and again like a phonograph needle. At the moment they caused her more suffering than her dread of her father's intervention. She could hear them through the first part of the second act, through the opening chorus, through Violet's song, through her own. It gave her pleasure to think how bad Violet was as the Lady Angela, and she remembered with satisfaction how she had once overheard Hugh Morison say to Philip Janaway that he considered they had paid too high for the use of Mrs. Faircloth's drawing-room.

Violet certainly had not the voice for the part, nor the presence in spite of her height and hugeness. She should have played the part of Jane . . . in her resentment she imparted this idea to Rosalind Pym-Barrett, heedless of the fact that as she had the part and was unaware of Sibylla's quarrel with Violet, she would probably regard it as a criticism of her own performance.

When the ladies went off the scene and Mr. Foddington had begun to rehearse Jane and Bunthorne in their duet, Sibylla saw Roker coming towards her. Immediately the centre of her disturbance changed and the enemy was no longer Violet but that public opinion which should betray her to private frustration. She had no clear plan of campaign, but felt instinctively that she must protect herself by some act of indifference. Without meeting his eye she slipped through a group of Morison and Kitson girls, taking refuge at the other end of the room, close to the male chorus.

This was not really a good place, as she had no one to talk to, and the next minute she moved a few yards farther along the wall to where Philip Janaway was standing. It must be weeks now since she had spoken to Philip Janaway, weeks indeed—she realized this almost painfully—since she had thought of him. She could not even remember when he had stopped seeking her out at rehearsals or offering to walk home with her. Yes, certainly at one time he had stopped doing these things, for the initiative in them was naturally his, not hers. What had made him stop? Had he merely become aware of her indifference

or had he heard that she was Being Talked About With a Married Man?

The question made her clumsy and conscious in her first address.

"Hullo, it seems ages since I've seen you."

"I've been at all the rehearsals."

"Have you really? I've missed two—I had a cold. But that isn't really much out of so many. I think we've all been very good, if you ask me."

She giggled nervously as he said nothing.

"It's a pity Violet's so poor as Lady Angela."

He gazed at her in some surprise and a little contempt.

"I don't think she's any worse than the rest of us. We're none of us up to much."

He gave her a faint smile and moved away, as if in response to a signal from Mr. Foddington which Sibylla was pretty sure he had not made.

She was trembling. What had made him behave like this? It could not be resentment at her indifference, for they had neither of them ever been on terms that gave him any right to complain of it. They had scarcely reached the outposts of courtship when she had lost interest in him. She had not behaved like Kitty, flirting with Captain Spellman when it looked as if she must be engaged to Hugh Morison. . . . No, he could have nothing against her personally.

But she was Being Talked About With a Married Man. . . . Her excommunication went in those words from mouth to mouth. It was based on truth, for it was the talk rather than the substance of it that condemned her. Her guilt did not necessarily lie in any censorious reconstruction of her friendship with John Roker, but in the plain, undeniable fact that it was being talked about. In Violet's words—still scratching her heart—she had made herself cheap. It seemed to her now as if the other girls avoided her—Dolly and Bertha Morison, Muriel Kitson, Grace Janaway, Rosalind and Sylvia Pym-Barrett . . . when had she last had anything to do with them outside the exchanges of the play? . . . But in fact it was so long since she had thought of anybody except herself and John Roker that she could not remember enough to tell if they shunned her or not. Of course they would shun her when the rumour became more widespread—they would despise her as "that sort of girl," just as she had despised other girls . . . as even now she despised the girl in the hotel at Mentone. . . .

Oh, what should she do? . . . The fact that she did not care twopence about any of them made no real difference, for the cruelty of the situation lay not in itself but in its threat to the wicked, precious thing that had given rise to it. "I can't give him up." The words sang themselves in her heart over the phonograph record of Violet's "made herself cheap." No, I can't give him up—I won't give him up. Why should I? I love him. It makes no difference that I can't marry him. I can help him. We're friends. His wife doesn't understand him. He's told me how much I mean to him—or did he say "how much your friendship means to me"? . . . she was always puzzling over his words, wondering if she had remembered them correctly or if they had meant exactly what she thought.

But there were some things less mistakable than words, and of these too she had a store—his hand lingering at her waist after the dance, or falling over hers as it lay in her lap, or his arm stretching behind her along the sofa, so that unless she leaned conspicuously forward she must lean against it and feel its warmth and strength. Such memories made her body shiver with pleasure while her mind shivered with pleasure and fear. She was afraid of her own wickedness; for she knew that these things were wicked in their enchantment. They could not be disguised as "platonic," as part of a courageous *fin-de-siècle* friendship, as acts of unselfish sympathy. He had not kissed her, but she knew that as far as she was concerned he was free to do so—that indeed she longed for him to seal her his by so unequivocal an act of love and delight. Of course it would also be the seal of her wickedness, but she could not think of his kiss without a fear that she might never know it.

"What are you thinking of? Is anything the matter?"

She started, and the flush of mingled warmth and shyness which he found so alluring crept up from her stiff white collar to the cloudiness under her hat.

"Oh! . . . I—I didn't know you were so close."

"Didn't you see me following you?"

She shook her head, feeling as she so often felt when they met—weak, with tears at the back of her eyes.

"You've been trying to get away from me. What's the matter?"

She dared not shake her head a second time, for if she did she would shake the tears right out of her eyes. They were no longer at

the back, but flooding across her eyeballs, so that she stared blindly into a pool in which his image floated. That image grew dark as he came closer and said tenderly:

“Look here, something *is* the matter. Won’t you tell me?”

“No.”

It was all she could say without crying. She longed to escape before her tears shamed her.

She felt him take her elbow and guide her through the hazy crowd of rehearsers towards the door.

“Come with me and tell me what’s the matter. We’ll neither of us be wanted for another quarter of an hour.”

“Oh, no.”

The words belonged to her reluctance, to that newly-raised instinct which urged her now to conceal that of which she used to be so exquisitely proud. But he chose to give them another context.

“In fact it may be half an hour, judging by the way Bunthorne’s holding things up. We’ll take a turn in the ballroom, shall we?”

The ballroom was next door to the Masonic Room—a high chamber with a ceiling ridiculously domed above great chandeliers, now draped in linen bags and hanging grotesquely like hams from the roof of some baroque kitchen. For the first time Sibylla saw the room in daylight; she and Roker had never been in it except when its illumination depended on the shaft from the open door, which had made it a cave of mystery. Now a cold, rainy afternoon looked in through four high-arched windows, transforming the mystery into so many square yards of polished floor, with a jumble of music-stands at one end and a number of cane-seated chairs set round a wall depressingly painted in green and maroon. It looked so dull and ordinary that it seemed quite natural for him to shut the door.

“Shall we try that Viennese hop again, or would you rather sit and talk?”

She was still unable to talk, so she held out her hands—one for his hand and one for shoulder—and with his arm round her waist they danced off, while he hummed the Blue Danube waltz. After a turn of the room he changed it to the Eton Boating Song.

“That’s the advantage of being one’s own band—one can change the music when one likes. That was the tune of the first dance we had together.”

“Yes, I know.” She was able to murmur that.

They went twice round the room to the new hop-waltz step from Vienna. It was a much more strenuous affair than the Valse Anglaise, and she could feel the perspiration gathering at her waist, under the heat of his arm; it was also much less trying to the conscience, for unlike the familiar English waltz it really needed practice.

After the third time round the room, he said:

"I think we've had enough. Let's sit down."

They sat down on two of the prim cane-seated chairs.

"Feeling better, eh?"

She nodded almost gaily. Her reactions to his company were following their usual course from weakness to confidence.

"But there's something the matter—why won't you tell me?"

"Oh, it is only something Violet Faircloth said. It upset me very much at the time, but it doesn't seem so bad now."

"Violet Faircloth mustn't say things to upset you," he smiled at her playfully. "What was it?"

"I dare say it won't sound very serious to you"—men, she knew, had minds above these things—"but she said we were being talked about."

"Who—you and me?—by whom?—what do you mean?"

"She said people had noticed our going away together into the ballroom. That's why"—smiling in her turn—"I was running away from you this afternoon."

She had not been watching his face while he was speaking a moment ago, or she would have seen it change. She did not look at it till his silence made her suddenly wonder about him. He was leaning forward, staring away from her across the room. Then he spoke.

"Perhaps we've been indiscreet. It's difficult to realize how silly and malicious gossip can be in a place like this. I never imagined people would see anything reprehensible in our coming into the ballroom just to practise over our steps. We're both keen on dancing."

"That's just what I said to Violet."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh, she was very sarcastic—asked if we were going to do a dance together at the performance, or something."

He gnawed his moustache. She could see that he was worried.

"Well, perhaps we'd better be more careful in future. You were wiser than I was this afternoon; but then of course I'd no idea what was happening. I shall miss our little escapes most dreadfully, but I

think perhaps we'd better not indulge in them at the risk of your being torn to pieces by the local cats."

"Oh! . . ."

She felt stricken. She could hardly believe that she had heard him rightly. It had been all very well to avoid him herself, in the fear that she might lose him altogether through her neighbours' tongues; but it was quite another thing to lose him—for she had lost him if she no longer met him alone—through his own choice, his own fear. . . . She began to lose control of herself, the words rushing to her lips without caution or convention.

"Oh, but that would be dreadful. I couldn't bear it. Please don't let us do that. Don't let us let them spoil everything. We can be more careful perhaps . . . not meet so often . . . as long as we can be together sometimes . . ."

He turned towards her, his eyes resting on her with a tenderness that suddenly restored her confidence in him.

"Sibylla, do you really like me so much?"

"Of course I do."

She had clasped her hands in her lap, holding them tightly between her knees, for she was still trembling though no longer so much afraid.

"But, my dear, I shall have to go away one day—not so very far ahead. You know that."

Her heart sank as she faltered:

"I know; but—"

"But what? I'm afraid there's no 'but' about it."

"You'll only be in London . . . we could meet there . . . or you could come down here sometimes. And we could write to each other."

Something about her—perhaps it was the combination of mental artlessness with physical maturity, perhaps the beauty and pathos of her pleading face with its great shadowy eyes—went suddenly to his head, and taking her in his arms, he kissed her. He did not know it was her first kiss.

It was a moment of which she had scarcely allowed herself to dream. As a young girl and as a girl in her mid-twenties she had often longed to know what it felt like to be kissed; but she had driven out the thought as immodest, as a part (if only an auxiliary one) of that curiosity which must always be denied. Lately she had dismissed it because it involved too much of her life and happiness . . . she dared not imagine what she so deeply desired.

Yet if she had pictured that moment in any degree at all, it was as a moment of passive assent coupled with a joyful certainty. A kiss in her world was chiefly an act of committal. A man did not kiss a girl unless he wanted to be engaged to her—a kiss was equivalent to a proposal and a girl accepted the kiss only if she meant to accept the proposal. Of course there were girls (doubtless Kitty was one of them) who allowed themselves to be kissed by men who had no intention of marrying them; but Sibylla was not one of those girls and the things that happened to them did not happen to her. No one had ever kissed her, because no one (with the exception of that one man long ago) had ever proposed to her. You could, of course, propose to a girl without kissing her, but you could not kiss a girl without by implication proposing to her. Therefore she had imagined the ecstasy of her first kiss to be an ecstasy of assurance, of a definite knowledge that somebody loved her and wanted to marry her; and when those days came when the only person whose kiss she wanted was already married, she imagined that her chief emotion would be delight in the knowledge that he loved her enough to marry her if he had been free . . . she could not ask for more.

She was altogether taken unaware by her own reactions. There was certainly nothing passive about them, and if there was any reassurance it was immediately lost in a tumult of emotions of which hunger rather than joy was the chief. As his lips touched hers, with the hard, heavy roughness of his moustache above them, some part of her being was suddenly liberated and rushed out as a flame rushes out of a new-opened furnace door, scorching the rash stoker. He had meant to kiss her lightly, but now he could not take his lips away, for her arms had come suddenly round his neck, holding his face to hers while she moaned and sobbed and laughed against it, her whole body trembling and twisting as she dragged him closer. Good Lord!—what had he got hold of? He managed to free his head.

“Take care! I hear someone coming.”

His words, or rather the tone in which he uttered them, brought her to her senses; she dropped her arms, and suddenly felt deeply ashamed.

He stood up and went over to the door, looking out into the passage.

“I thought I heard someone there. Anyhow, it sounds as if they’ve finished with Bunthorne. We’d better go back.”

"Yes, we'd better go back."

He looked at her a moment.

"Your hat's a little on one side—there's a mirror over there against the wall. I'll go in first, without you. We shan't be noticed so much if we come in separately."

"Yes, of course."

He went out; and she moved as in a dream towards the great ballroom mirror on the wall. In it she saw a queer, abandoned-looking woman, with a flushed face, a crooked hat and tousled hair uncoiling on her neck. She stared for a moment in sheer horror. Was that really herself—Sibylla Landless? Was that how he had seen her a moment ago? She shuddered. Her arms felt weak as she lifted them to take off her hat. Immediately the rest of her hair came tumbling down, a sinister, disreputable frame to that strange face. The horror grew. This could not be herself?—oh, no, no, no! . . . She set to work to bring back Sibylla Landless.

But as she worked—rolling up her hair and pinning her hat to it with vicious thrusts that seemed to ease rather than give pain—the thought would come that Sibylla Landless was gone for ever.

She certainly had not come back by the time they were all in the High Street 'bus on the way home. Still feeling a stranger to herself, Sibylla sat on the front seat, indifferent, almost unobservant, of the fact that Violet had pointedly refused to sit beside her. She sat by Kitty and Captain Spellman, near the door, for Captain Spellman was coming home with them—another fact that might have seemed important to her a couple of hours ago, but meant nothing at all to her now.

Kitty and the Captain were still in a state of gaiety, which they maintained even in the chilly atmosphere of the Landless drawing-room. The family code of good breeding would not allow Colonel and Mrs. Landless to express their disapproval more openly than by their manner, but that certainly was frigid enough, and Captain Spellman's determined friendliness and charm suggested that Sibylla had been right and Violet wrong in their argument of three hours earlier. But her triumph left her empty, almost unknowing—even when Captain Spellman, after an exchange of looks with Kitty, asked Colonel Landless if he might speak to him privately for a few minutes.

Her mood did not change with the situation, which soon transformed itself completely.

The gentlemen came back, both beaming.

"Shall I tell them, sir?" asked Captain Spellman, "or would you rather?"

"No, no; you tell 'em, my boy. Fire away."

"Well, I want to tell you that Kitty and I are engaged."

His manœuvre after tea, with Kitty's darting restlessness while he was away, had prepared Mrs. Landless and Georgie for an announcement of this kind. There were shrieks of delight and surprise—one real enough, the other slightly feigned—and a great deal of kissing, in which Sibylla had a share. Kitty embraced her warmly as she asked for her congratulations.

"You thought I was a naughty girl, didn't you?"

"We all thought that," laughed Mrs. Landless. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Oh, but Hughie really did ring up his aunt—he'd forgotten she had visitors—and by that time it was too late to go home."

"You're both very naughty children," wagged her mother.

Captain Spellman was asked to stay to dinner, for which a bottle of champagne was opened. Both Kitty's parents were pleased with the match, for they had already informed themselves to their satisfaction as to the prospective bridegroom's family, character and income, and saw besides the fitness of an officer's daughter marrying another officer. Apart from this, they would be glad to have Kitty married, for until she was, she would, as Mrs. Landless expressed it, "stand in her sisters' way." Much better get her off the scene and give a chance to the less attractive girls.

Kitty and Georgina shared a bedroom—a survival from their first days in Monypenny Crescent, when Sibylla had been the grown-up sister and Myra the baby in the nursery—so to her lot would doubtless fall the bulk of Kitty's confidences. For Kitty was babbling now—no longer secret and smiling as in lesser triumphs. Sibylla—still dazed and broken, a death's head at any feast—felt thankful that bed-time must release her from such an overflow of happy, successful love. It was therefore with a sinking heart that soon after she was in bed she heard her sister's footfall on the landing outside her door.

"May I come in, Sibylla?"

"Yes, come in."

Kitty came in with a candle, not looking quite so pretty as by day, with her hair in pig-tails and her body shapeless in a blue flannel dressing-gown.

"I wanted to show you this, Sibylla—Hugh gave it to me just before he left tonight. It's not really an engagement ring—he'll get that in town—but just something to go on with." She laughed gaily. "It's his signet ring, but it fits me exactly, doesn't it?"

She held out her pretty hand, and as Sibylla sat up to gaze at it she felt her tears gathering with a curious softness. Here, said her heart, is something that I shall never know; but in her heart was no envy—instead, a sort of pity for this happy, prattling child, to whom love had come so easily, without wickedness or pain.

"He said he fell in love with me the minute he first saw me," said Kitty.

Sibylla said nothing, because she could not say—that's what's happened to me too.

"Are you all right, Sibylla?"

"Yes, of course I'm all right."

"It's only that you look as if you had a headache or something."

"I *have* a little headache . . ."

"It isn't that anything's gone wrong between you and Mr. Roker?"

Sibylla turned pale and grabbed the bedclothes up to her chin.

"How do you know—what makes you think there's anything between me and Mr. Roker?"

"Oh, everyone knows you're having a flirtation," said Kitty, sitting down on the bed. "I was only wondering how far it had gone."

Her manner was unusually gentle and sympathetic, as if her successful love had had the same effect as her sister's distraught passion and made her tender.

"Do—do you think Father and Mother suspect anything?"

"No, I don't. It's only gossip at the rehearsals."

"Violet talked as if it was all over the town."

"Oh, Violet! . . ." Kitty's shrug got rid of Violet as she asked: "Has he kissed you yet?"

Sibylla nodded—equally unable to lie or to speak.

"Well, be careful, my dear—that's all. Don't let it go too far. He can't be of any real use to you unless you're prepared to go all lengths, and you're not at all the sort of girl to do that."

This view of the situation—though it was one that would have

shocked her unspeakably a few weeks ago—was a great improvement on Violet's attitude of contempt ("My dear, do you really think he's serious?" still scratched a little), and Sibylla felt suddenly moved towards Kitty, who understood these things so much better.

"I don't know—I—I don't know that I'm not."

"Oh, come, Sib . . . anyone can feel like that; but it doesn't mean anything. Believe me, a married man's no use, whatever one feels about him. He only keeps the other men away."

"I don't care about that. I don't want any other men."

"You want to get married some day, don't you?"

Sibylla shook her head and Kitty looked at her seriously.

"Would you marry him if he was divorced?"

Sibylla turned away and hid her face in the pillow.

"My dear, that's desperate . . . you know your life would be ruined—and you'd break the parents' hearts."

Sibylla still lay with her face hidden, and after a time Kitty asked:

"Has he ever said anything about it?"

Deep in her pillow, Sibylla murmured, "No."

"Then do pull yourself together, Sib. He'd probably never dream of such a thing and you're only making yourself miserable by thinking of it. If you can't be content with an ordinary flirtation, you'd better drop him altogether."

"Do—do you think he'd be content with an ordinary flirtation?"

"That's not for me to say. I scarcely know him. He's supposed to be a flirt, and I must say he has all the signs . . . but just how 'ordinary' the flirtation need be is another thing altogether. My opinion is that, short of publicly compromising himself, a man will go just as far as you'll let him. So it's up to you. But I shouldn't let him go too far—in fact, as he's a married man, I'd drop him altogether. I honestly should. And now, my dear, I really must fly. We'll have a good long talk about him some other time. I simply must get some beauty-sleep after a day like this, or I'll look a hag tomorrow. Thank heaven we don't have another rehearsal till Tuesday night."

She stooped over Sibylla and kissed her lightly. For a moment there was silence between them, a new sisterly silence, charged with sympathy; then Kitty went out, and Sibylla hid her face again. She was grateful to her and also a little ashamed of having talked so little about her engagement to Hugh Spellman. But her sister had left her feeling curiously re-established with herself. She was still shocked and

shaken, but no longer confused. She knew the worst. She knew that there was nothing John Roker asked her that she would not do, even if it meant the end of the world as she had known it. That abandoned-looking woman in the mirror was herself after all.

Mrs. Landless was "At Home" on first and third Mondays. The drawing-room fire leaped gaily behind defences of polished brass, scattering rubies among the tea-time silver on the brass Benares tea-tray, while a cake-basket made seductive by bows of ribbon offered selections of minute sandwiches and dainty sugared cakes to a trickle of visitors, usually running thickest between half-past four and five.

These visitors were overwhelmingly female—men were supposed to despise tea (a circumstance which made Colonel Landless order his to be served him separately in his study)—and it was, moreover, too much to expect a busy man to change into striped trousers and black morning coat in order to spend a vapouring hour before changing again for dinner. Therefore it was a real surprise and gratification to the ladies when a glossy black figure walked in behind Crofton's announcement of "Mr. Pym-Barrett."

Normally Bertie Pym-Barrett was too familiar a sight and too much without "meaning" in the matrimonial sense to rouse much interest. But his appearance was a welcome relief to an all-feminine gathering of which half were members of the same family. The others—Mrs. Kitson and her eldest daughter Barbara, Mrs. Blake, wife of the Rector of All Hallows, Mrs. Jebb, and a Miss Parlour who lived unfashionably on the Coney Banks—had all called to congratulate Kitty on her engagement, which had been announced in that day's *Morning Post*. It seemed natural that congratulation should also be the purpose of Mr. Pym-Barrett's visit.

"My dear lady"—he squeezed Mrs. Landless's hand—"we're all thrilled and delighted, though not perhaps"—with an arch glance at Kitty—"entirely surprised."

He was a big man with the manners of a little one.

"I hope this doesn't mean," he continued, "that we're going to lose her immediately."

"Well, not for some little time yet," said Mrs. Landless. "Of course nothing's fixed, but the wedding probably won't take place before June."

"Well, I must say that's a comforting thought to me, if not to

Captain Spellman. Apart from the loss of one of the nicest girls in the town, I was afraid that wedding preparations might deal yet another blow to our little performance next week."

"Next week," chorussed the girls—"is it really next week?"

"Next Thursday week as ever is," said Bertie Pym-Barrett, snapping his eyelids to denote wit, "and I had a dreadful moment of fear that our Patience might feel she hadn't the patience to spend so many long hours pretending to be in love with another man."

"But you never seriously thought I'd let you down so near the time?" said Kitty.

"No—not seriously. You must forgive me; but after this second collapse of Colonel Calverley I seem to have lost my nerve a little, and to be imagining that all our principals are going to resign."

"But—Calverley . . ." said Georgina, the first to speak. "You don't mean that Mr. Roker's thrown up the part, as well as Mr. Brooke?"

"I'm afraid that's just what I do mean. Haven't you heard about it?"

There was a sudden chattering of Sibylla's tea-cup in its saucer.

"Let me take that," said Kitty. "I'll get you some more. No, we haven't heard. Please tell us."

"Well, that was partly my reason for calling here—not my chief reason, of course. That was to congratulate Miss Kitty, to congratulate you all, on this morning's delightful news. But I'm aware that Mr. Roker's action concern this family very closely, especially Miss Sibylla—"

"Yes, of course," broke in Kitty, moving her chair so as to hide Sibylla partly from Pym-Barrett and entirely from her mother, "the luckless Lady Saphir must once again rehearse with another man. Why on earth has Mr. Roker given up the part?"

"He's leaving the town—left, in fact, for he told me last night that they were starting this morning. His wife's taken a sudden fancy to Torquay—I believe she never liked the Marine Hotel, and has been plaguing him to go for some time; and now she has simply insisted on trying somewhere else before the best places get booked up in the spring."

"She might surely have waited another fortnight till the performance was over," said Barbara Kitson. "It's very hard on Mr. Pym-Barrett to be expected to find someone else for the part at such short notice."

"That's what I thought myself," simpered Bertie; "but, though

I've never seen her, I understand she's a woman of great determination, and I also understand that she has all the money, which perhaps accounts for a good deal."

"Perhaps accounts for everything," said Miss Parlour, "including the fact that she's Mrs. Roker."

"Has anybody ever seen her?" asked Mrs. Blake. "She's never been to church, or else, of course, my husband would have called."

"I believe she's been seen on the Parade on sunny days," said Mrs. Kitson. "But she hardly ever goes out. Not that she's bedridden, I believe—in fact, I've heard that she's rather an attractive woman. I can't remember who told me."

"Perhaps she's what is called a *malade imaginaire*," tinkled Miss Parlour.

Their voices were spun round Sibylla like a web, in the midst of which she sat drinking hot tea—the fresh cup of tea that Kitty had brought her with the words in her ear: "Sit quiet—don't give yourself away." She could feel nothing but the hotness of the tea, scalding her throat as she swallowed it in gulps.

"Well, anyhow, she must be a very disagreeable, selfish woman," said Mrs. Landless, "with no regard for other people's feelings. And I can't say I think much of her husband, either, for allowing himself to be dragged away like that. But perhaps he wasn't dragged away at all—perhaps that's just an excuse. He may not have liked the part."

"He was doing very well in it," said Bertie. "One of our best voices. Perhaps that was the trouble—he may have thought himself too good for us. But whether he's left us because he wants to or because his wife wants him to, I don't mind telling you that I think he's treated us very badly. Mr. Brooke was quite different—he left us with two months to run instead of under two weeks, and besides, one had to respect his motive even if one didn't see the necessity."

"We're all very proud of him, really," said Mrs. Jebb.

"But what on earth can you do about a successor to Mr. Roker?" asked Georgie. "It was difficult enough to find one for Mr. Brooke, but now it must be almost impossible."

"Ah, Miss Georgie, you've brought me back to my muttons. That's really my purpose—my secondary purpose—in coming here, for I must consult Miss Sibylla—and Mrs. Landless, of course. But the situation is this—no, thank you, dear Miss Kitty, no more tea—there's absolutely no one in the town or out of it that I can think of to take

the part of Calverley at such short notice, unless—I promote a member of the male chorus."

The significance of this statement was at once apparent to the ladies.

"Have you anyone in mind?" asked Kitty.

"Well, yes—I had thought of young Jones—you know, young Randolph Jones, who works at the Midland and County Bank . . . quite a nice young fellow, with a really beautiful voice—he could easily take on the part, I'm sure, with a little extra rehearsal. Foddington thinks very highly of him. But of course we can settle nothing without the consent of the lady most concerned."

"Well, Sib, what do you think of having Randolph Jones?" asked Kitty, as Sibylla remained speechless. "You wouldn't mind him, would you?—Sib!"

"No," said Sibylla.

"What do you feel about it, Mrs. Landless?"

"Well, I can't possibly put you to any further embarrassment, can I, Mr. Pym-Barrett? We must make the best of what we can get, and though for many reasons I don't like the idea of . . . Of course there's no embracing of any sort in this opera, is there?"

Bertie Pym-Barrett's eyes flew open in horror.

"My dear lady! no, indeed! Arm in arm—that's how the ladies stand with the Heavy Dragoons when the curtain goes down. But if you have any objection, even that could be changed."

"Oh, no—that's harmless enough. After all, one takes a gentleman's arm to go in to dinner. The trouble is, of course, that Mr. Jones isn't a gentleman. . . . But really, Mr. Pym-Barrett, you mustn't have any more to contend with. If you think Mr. Jones is likely to make a success of Mr. Roker's part, invite him to take it by all means. Neither Sibylla nor I shall make any objection."

Bertie Pym-Barrett thanked her effusively, and soon afterwards took leave. The other visitors did not stay long behind him, and soon the hostess and her daughters were left alone with the tea-things. Mrs. Landless at once turned to Sibylla.

"Really, Sibylla, you must try to make yourself more agreeable when I have callers here. You scarcely spoke a word the whole of tea-time."

"I—I'm sorry. I've got a headache," faltered Sibylla.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but we all have headaches occasionally, and if they're not too bad to let us appear they're not too bad to let

us talk to our guests. Mr. Pym-Barrett had called to see you as well as Kitty, to consult you in a matter that particularly concerned you. So it was your duty to take some interest instead of just sitting drinking your tea and never saying a word. I'm sorry your head's bad, and if you go to the medicine cupboard in my room you will find some cachets; but, as I've told you again and again, you really must learn to be *bright*."

## VI

**M**YRA'S heart overflowed with Spring—life was almost too wonderful.

She had always felt a renewing surge of happiness when the daylight began to linger after tea and the sun no longer set over the sea but behind the tamarisks on Cuckoo Hill—when a strange breath came down from the woods outside the town, a breath that seemed to hold the sweetness of moss, even of primroses. The second half of February and the first half of March made together a month outside the calendar which was the most precious month of the year. April and August were precious because they brought the holidays, and Christmas was precious because it brought presents and parties; but this month woven of winter and spring was precious apart from its gifts—spilling delight even into the distempered boredom of her classroom at Highfield House, over the ugly, threadbare carpet and read-out bookshelf of her schoolroom in Monypenny Crescent, over the rice-pudding and liquorice powder and pavement-walks and baths and bed-times of ordinary life. Therefore it seemed almost too lavish of heaven to have crowded that month with so many exciting events and pleasant changes—events and changes which would have been enough to light up January with its chilblains or July with its examinations and now blazed as extravagantly as street-lamps in sunshine.

First of all there was the amazing news of Paardeberg, where the Boer General Cronje surrendered with four thousand of his troops. This, with General Buller's advance to the relief of Ladysmith, made Myra feel that the war was as good as won. She whooped and shouted and almost boasted of the black mark she was given at school for writing in her French exercise book the limerick about "the old man of Pretoria whose conduct grew gorier and gorier."

Such events sent the days galloping towards the end of February, where stood the date which had been beckoning her for months. She had counted the days as she tore them off her Shakespeare calendar, and now Mother had nearly doubled the rapture of anticipation by saying that she should go to the evening performance of *Patience* instead of to the matinée. Mother had said that it would be a pity if she did not see Kitty receive all the lovely flowers that would be handed up to her at the end of the show; and the white dress she had worn at Mrs. Blake's party would do perfectly well, with a new sash.

Then as if all this were not enough, had come the romantic, exciting announcement of Kitty's engagement to Captain Spellman. To have a real gentleman in khaki kiss her and tell her that she was going to be his little sister was an event so overwhelming that it could be savoured only in retrospect—at the time she had felt quite numb. It was making her too much like Ivy Betersden, and some days went by before things were perfectly real again. It is true that a little glory was lost by the fact that he was not going out to the Front. Malaria, Kitty explained, made that impossible; as if you once had had it you would be sure to have it again if you went to a hot country like South Africa. But as Kitty showed no more desire than Rose to emulate Dolly Gray—stating emphatically that she was jolly glad he did not have to go—Myra was in some degree reconciled to this drawback. Kitty would have a dear little house at Aldershot, and she had promised that Myra should visit her there.

This led up to what was perhaps the crown of all delight. Mother had said that she was to go to Winter Land for the Easter holidays. Apparently Captain Spellman had refused to wait for a June wedding, so it had been decided that he and Kitty should be married at the end of April, which meant that during the holidays everyone at Number Four Monypenny Crescent would be frantically busy and quite glad to be rid of a little girl who could not really do anything to help. Of course Rose might have been useful, Mother said, but she would not say more than "might," because lately Rose had grown very slack, and a daily woman from the town would probably do twice as much real work. Myra's dress—for an additional ecstasy was that she was to be one of the bridesmaids—could easily be made before the end of term and so spare poor Miss Gamble at least some part of her last-minute rush.

To be able to look forward to three extra, uncovenanted weeks at Winter Land, her return from which would not be to the dullness of school, but to the romantic and martial thrills of a khaki wedding—for the best man was a fellow-officer of Hugh Spellman's—seemed a progress in delight which a more sophisticated, timid intelligence might see as inevitably leading to disappointment. Not so Myra. A large part of her happiness was due to her perfect confidence in it. She no more expected betrayal from the future than from the past.

As a reward she had two days of perfect happiness before the blow fell. It fell on a rather heady mood, at the end of a morning's mixed boasting at school, where her sister's wedding and her own holiday had been combined to provoke her school-fellows to snubs which in their turn provoked defiance.

"I don't care what you say—Kitty *is* going to be married to an officer in the army and I *am* going to be a bridesmaid and have a white chiffon dress and a silver sash and I *am* going to Winter Land for the Easter holidays. So there's no good your saying I'm not."

"Nobody's saying you're not—only they're getting a little tired of hearing you say you are."

She would be glad to escape to the more pliant company of Rose; but though she burst into many rooms at Number Four, including the forbidden kitchen, Rose was nowhere to be found.

"Where's Rose?" she asked at dinner-time.

"Never mind now," said Mother, "and take your elbows off the table, dear."

That meant of course that she must wait till dinner was over and Crofton no longer listening to everything they said.

She waited for the first possible minute and asked again:

"Where's Rose?"

"Come into the drawing-room with me, darling, and I'll tell you."

This made everything rather solemn and Myra was in some degree prepared for at least the tenor of her mother's news.

"Rose has gone away—she isn't coming back."

"Oh, Mother! . . . Why? . . . is she ill?"

"No. But she's done something very wrong and I've had to send her away."

"What was it?—when did she do it? I thought you had to give a servant a month's notice."

"So you have, as a rule—but not always."

"Oh, Mother, has Rose done something dreadful?"

"It doesn't matter to you, dear, what she's done."

"But, Mother, it does! I like Rose and I don't like her going away. Why had she to?"

"Now be a good girl and don't ask questions."

"But was it something dreadful?"

"Yes, dear—and neither Father nor I want you to know anything about it."

This was frustration at its worst and Myra became frantic.

"But, please, Mother, I want to know—I *must* know. Has she murdered anybody?"

"Now don't be a silly little girl. Of course not. She's done something that you wouldn't even understand if I told you about it, so please don't let me have any more questions."

"But, Mother—"

In self-defence Mrs. Landless passed to the second part of her communication more abruptly than she had intended.

"Listen to me, dear! I haven't finished yet. I'm afraid this means that you can't go to Winter Land after Easter."

No longer was curiosity the plague. Myra, overwhelmed by the consequences of Rose's crime, lost at once all interest in its nature. At first she was incredulous with horror.

"Oh, Mother—you don't mean that! Oh, say it isn't true! Oh, Mother, I shall die if I don't go."

"Now, Myra—don't exaggerate, dear. It's wrong to talk like that. I'm very, very sorry you're disappointed; but we all have disappointments to bear and this one can't be helped, so you must make the best of it."

She herself was not looking forward to having Myra at home during the most hectic part of the wedding preparations.

"But, Mother, why can't I go? I don't see why I can't."

"Surely you can see that as Rose has been sent away in disgrace, you can't possibly go and stay at her home."

"I don't see why not. I need never speak to her. Mrs. Lusted could look after me."

"Don't be silly, Myra."

That was the worst of Myra. In grief she was always so unreasonable that she lost your sympathy. If she had only burst into tears like

any ordinary little girl, her mother would have kissed her and comforted her and perhaps given her a treat to make up for what she had lost. But this spate of argument, exaggeration and heroics only irritated her and made her feel that it was high time Myra learned to go without something she wanted.

Not that tears were absent from the occasion. Myra sobbed breathlessly and stormily when she really saw herself doomed—when she knew that by no struggle or twist could she enter Paradise. She cried long after her mother had sent her out of the room, and even when the first violence of grief was past there would be moments when a realization of it overwhelmed her anew and she would weep as one bereaved.

For she was bereaved. Never to see Winter Land again (for the loss of her Easter holiday there was only preliminary to the loss of her summer holiday and every holiday for ever), never to see the little red house with its white-rimmed windows, never to see the oasts or the barns or the animals lodged in them, never to see kind Mrs. Lusted with her white apron and hard brown hands, or good-natured Rose who had listened to so many stories that no one else cared to hear, never to see Watt's Palace or the Tillingham Marshes or Ellenwhorne and the jolly Streets . . . it was a concentrated pain of loss which nothing could ever relieve. As formerly her happiness had coloured the drabbest moments of the day, the inescapable routine of her servitude as a little girl, so now her disappointment darkened all the lights of surprise and adventure by which she so often escaped. Paardeberg and an ice at Brown's were for a time equallyavourless, her bridesmaid's dress was a mere painful collection of pins in a battiste lining, and the Municipal Band playing "The Absent-minded Beggar" played no more than a tune.

Her sisters were sorry for her and did what they could to make her forget her sorrows; but only Georgie—whom she liked the least—could spend much time or trouble on her. Not only did her humble state in the *Patience* chorus involve her less than the others in the growing pace of the rehearsals, but she was without any outstanding joys or griefs of her own to compete with Myra's in her heart. Kitty, though she had stood the ice at Brown's, could not be expected to spend much time or thought outside her own crowding, enchanting, exciting affairs, while Sibylla's thought, if not her time, was just as completely if more wretchedly filled. Once, in the early stages of

Myra's grief, finding her sobbing alone in a corner of the dining-room, she had put her arms around her and tried to comfort her.

"Poor little Myra, poor little girl! . . . I know how miserable you feel; but don't cry . . . don't cry . . ."

Then suddenly Sibylla herself had burst into tears, and for a moment it had seemed more as if she was clinging to Myra than comforting her. Myra was frightened and struggled out of her arms—Sibylla's tears reminded her of that dreadful day when Rose had sobbed and cried on Cuckoo Hill. What was happening to the grown-ups that they should suddenly discard their immunities? It was all a part of the changing balance of her world.

She began to feel that in some way Sibylla's grief was connected with Rose's, and both with Rose's departure. But Sibylla no more than Mother would tell her why Rose had gone. Even Kitty was granite when assaulted on this subject—for when the first violence of her misery had passed, Myra's curiosity revived and increased in sharpness at much the same rate as the misery flattened out into a general ache of disappointment.

"Curiosity killed the cat" was all that Kitty would say, and after a time Myra stopped asking questions, or even wanting so desperately to know the answers. But before her curiosity finally starved it had reached such a point of ravenousness that she had actually listened to a private conversation between Kitty and Sibylla, hoping that it would tell her something. She knew that it was very wrong of her to do this, but when she heard Sibylla crying in her bedroom and then a minute later saw Kitty go in to her and the door which she had shut become unlatched without her knowing, she really could not help creeping up to listen.

That was the day after Rose's disappearance, though it felt like a month. Sibylla had come in to help Myra dress, looking as if she had a bad cold, though she said she hadn't—later on she said she had a headache. Myra felt convinced that Sibylla had had something to do with Rose's departure, or why did she look so miserable and answer so shortly questions that had scarcely any connection with it?—such as "Who will take me a walk this afternoon?" or "Will Crofton give me my bath?" Now she was crying bitterly—making quite a noise, as if she was a little girl instead of a grown-up lady. Myra was on her way to the schoolroom, as it was too wet for her to go out for a

walk with Georgie; she took great care not to make a noise as she stood at the door, listening to Sibylla crying and Kitty comforting her, though sometimes she seemed not so much to be comforting as scolding.

"Really, Sib, you mustn't cry like that. You'll give yourself away if you go about with your face all red and swollen. Can't you make up your mind that the whole thing's over and done with and that the only thing for you to do is to forget it and find somebody else?"

Was Sibylla looking for another housemaid? Myra had thought that it was always her mother who went to Miss Egan's registry office in the High Street. But perhaps if Rose's disgrace had some connection with Sibylla, Mother had said that she must do the servant-hunting this time.

She said something to Kitty now, but she was crying so much that Myra could not quite hear what it was. It sounded like "I shall never forget."

"Oh, don't, Sib—don't be such a muff. I'm sorry—and you know I do sympathize; but you really must pull yourself together. I did everything I could for you at the start, but the time has come when you must do something for yourself."

"I—I would—b—but you won't let me do it."

"If you mean throw up your part, I certainly won't. I never heard of such a thing. You'd simply be giving yourself away—everyone would then know everything for certain, while now they're only guessing. Besides, even without that, you couldn't be so mean to poor Bertie. I think he'd lose his wits if he had to find another Lady Saphir on the top of everything else."

"Sylvia could take the part."

"Not at three days' notice. If you were going to chuck it you should have done it when the thing happened, though I'm thankful you weren't fool enough for that. Sylvia might have managed Lady Saphir—as she's been in the chorus all along—if she could have started rehearsing at once with the new Calverley. But it's a week too late for that now, and besides, as I've been saying, that isn't the chief point. The chief point is that you don't give yourself away on a plate to all the spiteful gossips in the town."

Myra was feeling quite bewildered now. It seemed as if Rose's departure had something to do with *Patience*; but how could this be? Sibylla's reply did not explain.

"I really don't mind what anyone says about me—and I don't suppose they can say more than they're saying already."

"Oh, can't they?—you'd soon find out that they can. Besides, it isn't only you—it's Father and Mother. You must think of them a little."

Sibylla's voice came with a sudden, new sharpness.

"Have you always thought of them?"

"Yes, I have. Really, Sib, nobody's talked about me much, considering the things I've done."

"What have you done?"

Kitty's laugh brought a sudden lightness and ease into the conversation—even Myra could feel it through the chink of the door.

"Oh, never you mind. But you can take it from me that I've had my bad times as well as you. But I've always kept two things in mind—not to make a present of my misfortunes to other people, and to realize that the cure is homeopathic."

"What *are* you talking about?" cried Sibylla irritably.

"Well, you know what a homeopathic doctor is—"

"Yes—Doctor Saddler; no other doctor will meet him in consultation."

"I didn't mean that; I mean the way they cure you with small doses of the germ that's made you ill—'hair of the dog that bit you' sort of thing. I've told you already that the only cure for being let down by someone is to make somebody else pick you up."

The sobs came back into Sibylla's voice.

"When you talk like that, you only show me that you've no idea of what I'm feeling. I don't *want* anyone else to pick me up, as you call it, even if I could *make* them do it—which I can't. I'm not like you."

"What about Philip Janaway—I thought he used to admire you."

"He'll scarcely talk civilly to me now—he's *heard*."

"Well, then, he's probably heard too that it's all over; and if you make yourself attractive and give him a little encouragement he'll probably come on again. But if you go about looking like a death's head with a bad cold . . . ."

Sibylla sniffed loudly.

"Kitty, you're quite heartless. And I tell you it's no good. . . . You don't understand. I'm finished with all that . . . I simply can't bear the thought . . . after . . . again . . . ."

Her voice became lost and muffled, as if she had hidden her face in the pillow.

"Good heavens!" cried Kitty. "I don't mean anything serious—only a little flirtation to take your mind off things and restore your self-respect."

"I don't deserve to have any self-respect," said Sibylla in a slow, tragic voice.

"Oh, Sib, don't be so stuffy! You haven't done anything that dozens of girls haven't done in their day and been none the worse for."

Sibylla's voice once more became muffled, and Myra could catch only the words—"anything he had asked me."

"Well, he didn't ask you—so you can be thankful. Cheer up, and if you like I'll lend you some of that stuff Dolly got for me. You just put a dab on your cheek-bones and smooth it over with a little *poudre de riz*, and it's quite undetectable and absolutely irresistible."

"No, thank you," said Sibylla quite crossly. "I haven't come to that."

Kitty heaved a sigh that was almost a groan.

"Well, no one can say I haven't done my best for you. And I've achieved something if I've prevented you giving yourself away completely. I wish I could make you happy again—and when I'm married you must come and stay with me and we'll see what the regiment can do . . . which reminds me, I've a fitting at half-past two and it's twenty to three already. I must rush; and do please try . . ."

Myra did not wait to hear any more. She slipped away—willingly as well as quickly, for the conversation had long ceased to be interesting or even comprehensible.

On the last day of February—a day of squalls and sun, winter and spring—the Marlingate Amateur Operatic Society presented Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* at the Concert Hall. The performance was not unlike the weather. Very little of it was really good—in fact only, perhaps, Kitty's singing, though Philip Janaway, doubtless inspired by her, made more of Grosvenor, both in singing and acting, than anyone had expected. Some of it was quite bad—notably Violet Faircloth as the Lady Angela. Her obvious and entire self-satisfaction only made more exasperating her clumsy movements, stilted acting and indifferent voice, not always even in tune. Some people said too that the eldest Miss Landless was a failure as the Lady Saphir, singing without expression and moving like a stick. The prevalent atmosphere,

however, was one of cloud and insecurity. The production had been in some ways over, in other ways under, rehearsed, and the players seemed both weary and uncertain of their parts.

But the audiences which crowded the two performances did not come to be critical. They came to play their expected part in a Marlingate social occasion, to watch their friends and relatives perform and think how much better they performed than the friends and relatives of other people. Some of them also came because they "never missed a Gilbert and Sullivan opera"—whether produced by the D'Oyly Carte Company or by local amateurs. Some came, too, because the entertainment was in aid of the Absent-minded Beggar Fund, though it must be confessed that by the time the curtain went up most of the audience and all the performers had entirely forgotten the war.

There was certainly very little to remind them of it—only Captain Spellman's khaki uniform in the middle of the front row at the evening performance. He had come down specially to watch his beloved's triumph and see handed up to her the silver churn filled with creamy roses which was his public tribute of love and pride.

Kitty, of course, received more bouquets and boxes than anyone else. Not only was she playing the lead, but she was also personally the most popular of all the cast. Bunches of lilac and lilies, baskets of roses, irises, daffodils and all the gay coinage of spring flowers, boxes of crystallized peaches, candied apricots and chocolate creams were gathered round her feet during those last delicious minutes when, with the audience clapping and stamping in front of her, the company clapping and laughing behind, the drop-curtain wavering uncertainly and rather dangerously above her head, she stooped smiling to receive the wreath of silvered willow with which Geoffrey Morison had expressed his surviving regret and regard.

Kitty in her quilted frock and panniers, with her flowery hat and her hair a bubble-cloud of curls, was like a princess in a fairy-tale, radiantly arriving at the magical end of Happy Ever After. Secure of one man's love and another's forgiveness, the snares of maidenhood safely past, the golden gates of marriage in sight, she tasted the sweets of a triumph both public and personal, gratifying not only to herself but to the one she loved best.

Nobody would have believed that she was not the happiest being in the Hall. Certainly nobody would have seen a competitor in bliss in her youngest sister Myra. The little figure in its starched white frock,

almost occulted by the overflowings of Mrs. Landless's violet and silver "opera cape," seemed, as far as personal happiness was concerned, to have no point of comparison with that blonde and bowing princess whose eyes rested almost pityingly for a moment on the little sister to whom she had promised a smile.

Poor little Myra! Poor little kid! She would have a dreary time of it when the sister closest to her in age and heart was married. She would miss, too, poor silly Rose. . . . It had really been extremely good-natured and thoughtful of that Mrs. Street to write and offer to have her for the Easter holidays. Not only would it make up for her disappointment over Winter Land, but it would give her companions of her own age, help her to be more like other children and better able to get on with them at school.

Thus Kitty judged that letter and its effects with a grown-up person's mind. She had no true idea of its nature; for the quality of her small sister's rapture was one which no grown-up person—even one not so very much older than herself—could realize. It belonged to a life which ceases at puberty and is forgotten by adolescence—a life in which all bushes burn, all colours are light, all lights are stars and the Voice of God comes suddenly from the homeliest places. If Mrs. Street's letter was to be viewed as nothing more than an act of practical kindness, then St. George was merely being helpful and good-natured when he slew the dragon, and Michael guarded the gates of Paradise with a wooden sword.

"Oh, Mother, Mother—how wonderful! how lovely! Oh, I can't bear it—I shall die!" Thus Myra's ecstasy repeated the verbiage of her despair.

This time Mrs. Landless listened good-humouredly enough. She herself was intensely relieved to have the situation thus dealt with and the child, after all, taken out of her way while she was so busy. It really was extremely kind of Mrs. Street—and she had written a very nice letter, too. She seemed a nice, sensible sort of woman and would take good care of Myra. She had promised that the little girl should not visit Winter Land, though of course the old Lusteds felt their daughter's disgrace acutely and were kindly enough to feel Myra's disappointment too. It was they who had told Mrs. Street how unhappy they knew she would be when she heard she was not coming out into the country. "So I thought—why shouldn't she come to us instead, and have her holiday? We have plenty of room for her and will look

after her well. She is a dear little girl and the children would love to have her with them for a few weeks."

An older person might have feared that going to stay at Ellenwhorne would not be so good as going to stay at Winter Land; but Myra knew that it would be better. An older person might have shrunk from companions who had already proved alarming; but to Myra the Street children had become heroes and Toby Street a god. A grown-up person might have thought that she would miss Rose: Myra never thought of Rose.

At first her happiness had been chastened by the fear that she would wake up and find it a dream. But as time passed, the rest of life began to fall into the pattern of bliss, which assumed all the solid aspects of reality. She began now to revel in the coming performance of *Patience*, which had been obscured first by her woe and then by its relief. All the exciting events leading up to the great climax could now in turn be savoured: her new sash, her supper (which could almost have been called late dinner, for there were three courses) with Father and Mother before the show, the drive in Mr. Porter's cab—clop, clop, clop, clop down the High Street, where lamplight and starlight met in enchanting gleams—the crowds pouring in to the Concert Hall, the ladies and gentlemen in evening dress, the smell of sealskin jackets and otto of violets, it all was rapture even in no brighter light than that of the present moment. She might even have enjoyed it if she had not been going to Ellenwhorne; but by a miracle of mercy no such detachment was required of her. The present moment was transparent to the sunshine of the future. Behind all the joys of the concert hall, the pretty dresses, the cheerful music, the glittering stage, shone Ellenwhorne—a Watt's Palace of freedom and delight, where Ivy Betherden took the flickering shape of a Street daughter and a new, wonderful masculine figure hovered near her, a Grosvenor to her Patience, a gentleman in khaki to her Kitty Landless. . . .

For Myra almost the only figure on the stage was Kitty. She was not really interested in her other sisters, who, after all, did not have very much to do. In fact she had been unable at first to recognize Georgie among the strangely-garbed women who stood singing and posturing when the curtain went up.

*"Twenty love-sick maidens, we,  
Love-sick all against our will—  
Twenty years hence we shall be  
Twenty love-sick maidens still."*

Georgie was far from being among either the best-looking or the most talented of the chorus, and had been made to stand in rather an inconspicuous position at the back of the stage. She was enough aware of her deficiencies to feel discouraged by them, yet not enough to accept without resentment their public assessment by others. It had seemed unfair that she should be in the chorus, while Kitty and Sibylla had solo parts. Kitty she acknowledged had a good voice, but she did not think that Sibylla's was any better than her own, and tonight it was scarcely so good. Now and then it seemed to choke and die away—and she could not act at all; it really was pathetic to watch her try. She and Violet were a pair—quite hopeless. They had been better at some of the rehearsals.

Georgie was one of those who had grown heartily weary of the whole thing. It had gone on much too long and was not worth half the trouble spent on it. She felt relieved to think that after tonight there would be no more rehearsals, no more practisings, no more fittings. She would be free; her time would be her own again—and spring was coming. Life, she supposed, would be more or less a burden until after Kitty's wedding, but when that was safely over she could begin to enjoy herself.

I shall get Dolly Morison to come for some nice long walks with me, she thought as she posed uncomfortably beside an urn in the garden of Castle Bunthorne. We might walk out over the Gringer some day and have a picnic lunch at French Landing—or we might get as far as the Stussells . . . no, I doubt if we'd ever get there and back in a day. It must be seven miles, at least. But perhaps we could hire bicycles . . . it would be lovely to go wheeling over those cliffs and downs. . . . I simply must hire a bike this summer and get out of the town. I wish I could buy one; but I don't see how I can possibly manage it on my present allowance and Mother's always scolding me for not being well-dressed enough. . . . Perhaps if I could hear of a good, cheap second-hand bike I might buy it. . . . What I want more than anything just now is a bicycle—and I don't care if Father *does* say it's unladylike. . . .

Mrs. Landless was worried about Sibylla's make-up. It really was terrible. She had put on a great deal too much, and it had changed her face, making her look hard and—well, not respectable. She did not like to see Sibylla looking like that—to realize that she was capable of looking like that even with the assistance of rouge and wet white. Of course, she supposed, girls had to make up for a stage performance, even if chastely guaranteed as "amateur theatricals," but she must say she did not like it and wished they did not have to do it. Sibylla looked a sight.

*"Twenty love-sick maidens, we,  
Love-sick all against our will—  
Twenty years hence we shall be  
Twenty love-sick maidens still."*

Mrs. Landless shuffled uneasily on her cane-bottomed chair. The words made her feel uncomfortable; for it really seemed likely that at the end of twenty years quite a lot of these girls would be still unmarried. There were no men in Marlingate, for the Heavy Dragoons who came prancing in at that moment did not, except for two of their officers, count as men at all. There were not enough men to "go round" the maidens of Marlingate; it did not seem as if there would ever be a man for Sibylla. She was twenty-nine, and since that Harris man ten years ago there had not even been a nibble—and she was beginning to look old.

Of course in a family of four daughters it was nice to have one who would be the "daughter at home," the comfort of her parents in their evening years. But there seemed to be already a candidate for that post in Georgina, and Mrs. Landless did not want two daughters-at-home—three if Myra did not grow up more easily marriageable than her sisters. Thank goodness that Kitty was going to be married so soon and so well; and of course her marriage would improve the others' chances. . . . Not only would it free them of a constant and formidable rival, but they would be able to go and stay with her and meet more men. A regiment of the line might be more use than a regiment of Heavy Dragoons.

*"Love-sick all against our will"*

sang Sibylla with the chorus. Yes, it was against her will now—this sickness of love which had survived the death of hope. While she still

wisdom of God, and we ask, "Why?" a thousand and a thousand times. But the Christ above us is the sunshine that warms our experiences until they give us of their hidden energy. Our tears are the falling dew ; our struggles are the storms which send our roots deeper. He, the Sun, is our resurrection, bringing to the surface of character the strongest elements that lie hidden within us. He, the Sun, is also the life of our life, for He tells us how to grow, what to absorb, and what to reject.

The soul that lives in Him has a kind of life that is fruitful, and when that soul has produced its crop of good deeds and holy thoughts the God of all the earth will lift it into a nobler life and give it a grander task and a wider opportunity.

reeked. It would be months before Sibylla could again feel happy and at ease with Violet.

As for Kitty, she was sorry now that she had confided in her; for Kitty obviously did not understand. She saw the affair only in the light of her own experiences, not as it really was. For one thing, she evidently did not know how little had really happened—by imagining a series of ardent embraces she impoverished Sibylla's memory of a single kiss; for another, having imagined more than there was, she made light of it, outraging her sister's conventions and wounding her pride.

Of course she owed to Kitty the fact that her situation had only been guessed at, never publicly exposed. But for Kitty she would have thrown up her part and let gossip do what it liked with her. Yet was this really a debt of gratitude? It could make no difference to her now if rumour reached her parents' ears, since the worst that rumour could threaten had already befallen her. As for Philip Janaway, or any other man with whom Kitty imagined she could find consolation, he was as much lost to her as he had been a month ago. Not only must her infatuation for John Roker be known to every man in the cast, but for no man in the cast or outside it had she so much as a feeling of pleasurable interest. Once again—Kitty did not understand.

*"Twenty years hence we shall be . . .  
Ah, miserie!"*

She shuddered as she turned to walk off the stage with those other Marlingate spinsters. The draught that blew from the wings seemed to search her very soul. . . .

But the music that followed her out was warm and light as an English drawing-room. Rum-ti-tum-ti-tiddly-o . . . When would she ever be able to forget the tunes that had now become part of the machinery of her brain? . . . Hear the soft note of an echoing voice, of an old, old love long dead—Tread a gay but classic measure—Prithee, pretty maiden, prithee, tell me true, Have you e'er a lover dangling after you?—Prithee tell me, is it true I frightened him away? Hey, but I'm doleful, willow willow waly! . . . The music sang through her most shameful self-questionings, it hummed through her wakeful nights and lilted in her weeping. Never, never, never, she told herself, would she listen again to the music of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*. Even a distant echo of the overture blowing up to

Monypenny Crescent from the bandstand in the Town Park would be enough to give her shudders of distaste. Thank heaven that after tonight she need hear no more of it, save by unfortunate accident. As soon as she got home she would destroy her copy of the score; she would do her best, too, to get rid of Georgie's and Kitty's, for fear that anyone should ever find them and strum them over.

For to that music—that tripping, tuneful, gay, facetious music—her tragedy was set. All the banners of grief and shame and passion had swept past her to the tinkle of a little tambourine. Fa la la la la la la la la and miserie!



## P A R T T W O

### TRUMPET

*For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?*—ST. PAUL.

#### I

THE August sunshine on the Marine Parade was golden and clear as German wine. It dripped over the sea, which under it lost its primary blue and became a gold-shot green. The tide was coming in fast, gnawing at the beaches and congesting the bank-holiday crowds into the patches of hot odorous shingle above the high-water mark. Here they sat, watching their children paddling and their sand-castles being washed away with the more expert designs of the beach-artists, who—with a couple of hours to spare till the sand reappeared—were counting the money in their caps. The Pierrots, the Nigger Minstrels, the Punch and Judy man, the Salvation Army and the Children's Special Service Mission had moved in their pitches with the tide and continued to entertain or to edify their patrons, among whom the sweet-sellers, ice-cream sellers, balloon sellers and newspaper sellers still cried their wares, adding to the orchestra of human sound that squealed and chattered above the sober chant of the sea.

Only a very few had left the beach to join the strollers on the parade or sit at their ease with ices, buns or winkles in any of the various small shops that jostled one another beyond the carriage-way. The Marine Gardens were almost deserted, though a military band was playing. At night when all the fairy-lamps were lit and the band played dance-music, it would be as crowded as the beaches were now. But in the morning the trippers preferred the beaches, leaving the gardens as a refuge for those Marlingate residents who had not left the town for their summer holidays.

As a rule all superior holidays in the town were taken during August, and those who for any reason had not gone away would have been far too careful of appearances to visit the Marine Gardens on

the first Monday. But this year the threat of war had kept people at home. Only the reckless would venture even as far as furnished rooms in Marlpost or Copstreet with the chance of a war with Germany starting at any moment. Of course certain optimists had asserted that neither Britain nor Germany would be such fools as to go to war with each other and that even if they did it was no reason for renouncing one's annual change or for running the risk of having to pay for rooms one had not occupied. The Morisons had all gone away a week ago to Malvern, and Bertie Pym-Barrett had actually been rash enough to take Rosalind, his only unmarried sister, on a trip to France. But on the whole very few houses in New Marlingate were shuttered and empty this year, and no explanation or evasion was required from either Mrs. Blake or Mrs. Landless when they met each other in the Marine Gardens.

"No news, I suppose," said the Rector's wife, settling herself beside the Colonel's widow on one of the twopenny chairs.

"No. I sent Sibylla out to get a paper nearly twenty minutes ago, but she hasn't come back. I wonder what's happened to her."

"The mid-day papers hadn't arrived at Bond's when I called there. Everything seems delayed and upset today. Personally I shall be glad when it's all over."

"What's all over?"

"I mean when the war's actually declared and we've lost our last hope."

"I shall go on hoping after it's declared," said Mrs. Landless belligerently.

The Rector's wife sighed.

"I envy you—having only daughters."

"It's the first time anyone's envied me that."

"Well, at least you don't have to worry about their joining the army and being killed. Norman told me that if war's declared he will enlist at once. I can't help feeling afraid . . ."

"If I had a son in the army I should be proud, not afraid. Fortunately my son-in-law, Major Spellman, is sure to be in the thick of the fighting."

The spirit of Colonel Landless seemed to dwell and enlarge itself in his widow, who ever since his death five years earlier had been growing more and more military and aggressive in her ideas. Mrs. Blake did not attempt to argue with her. Apart from the uselessness

of it, she did not want to offend her. Mrs. Landless still paid for four sittings in All Hallows' Church, though Sibylla went to St. Nicholas' and Myra was seldom at home. They could not afford to lose such a good—customer seemed the only word; for it was terrible the way people were giving up going to All Hallows' Church . . . giving up going to church at all, she feared, though of course St. Nicholas', having become so "high," had taken away a certain number. When she and Alfred had first come to Marlingate as a young couple, All Hallows had been crowded with all the nicest families in the town; only fishermen and tradesmen had gone to St. Nicholas'. They had been able to afford a curate and a really good organist . . . dear old Mr. Foddington, it was enough to make him turn in his grave the way the services were rendered now, with only that girl at the organ and scarcely a decent voice in the choir. . . . But what can you do without money? and everyone agreed that there was very little money in the town. Back in the 'nineties people had said that Marlingate was going downhill, but it had been wealthy and exclusive then compared to what it was now—practically no winter season, so many of the best families gone and the houses in Pelham Square being turned into flats. . . .

"There's Sibylla at last," said Mrs. Landless.

A tall figure was hurrying rather breathlessly towards them, a newspaper clutched in its gloved hand.

"I'm sorry I've been so long, but—"

"Where *have* you been? I thought you were never coming back."

"Good-morning, Sibylla dear."

"Oh, good-morning, Mrs. Blake. I'm sorry, Mother, but I simply couldn't get a paper. Bond's was sold out by the time I got there, and I had to walk nearly as far as Fish Street before I could find a newspaper boy. And then he made me pay twopence."

"You mean to say you've paid twopence for a halfpenny newspaper," cried Mrs. Landless, holding out her hand for the *Globe*, with which Sibylla had forgetfully begun to fan herself.

"Well, I argued with him about it—that's another thing that delayed me; but he wouldn't let me have it for less, and he hadn't many papers left and there were lots of people standing round and willing to pay—"

"You should have refused to buy it. It was encouraging dishonesty

to let him sell you a halfpenny paper for twopence. You should have been strong-minded and walked away."

"But Mother"—Sibylla's brow contracted with the agony of her self-defence—"you told me to get a paper, and if I'd come back without one you'd not have been pleased."

"You could have found a more honest boy. Don't tell me all the newspaper boys are thieves."

"They've probably all agreed among themselves to charge two-pence; and if I'd gone about looking for another one I'd have been later still coming back. Besides, I've paid for it out of my own money, so you won't lose."

"Don't speak to me like that, Sibylla. It isn't the money I care about—it's the principle of the thing."

"Well, let's see what's in the paper, anyway," said Mrs. Blake. Not that she really wanted to know, for she had caught sight of the headline—"Cabinet Discusses German Reply to Ultimatum"—and her heart was already faint enough with what she had read in her *Standard* that morning. But she wished to end a scene which was painful to her as well as Sibylla.

She felt sorry for the girl. Not that Sibylla was a girl at all—she must be at least forty. But that was how one thought of daughters who lived at home, whatever age they were; and her mother treated her just the same as she had when she was twenty. She treated them both like that, though of course Georgina had more outside interests, with her games and her golf. She fussed over them and ordered them about and would not let them call their souls their own . . . no, that was not quite true, for Sibylla's soul was the only part of her that had achieved any independence. Her mother had been very much annoyed at her giving up All Hallows' and going to St. Nicholas', but she had not been able to stop it. Much as she deplored the form it had taken, Mrs. Blake could not grudge her that measure of self-assertion.

"Come and see me one day, my dear," she said, when they had read the stop-press news and told each other how serious it was. "Any day at tea-time, if you like to ring up."

The Rector of St. Nicholas' was unmarried—one of those celibates, no doubt; a great pity. Sibylla must feel the lack of a Rector's wife.

"Thank you: I should like to very much. . . . Mother, do you

mind if I go home now? I have some letters I want to write before lunch."

"Letters? Whom to?"

"Oh, only to Maule and Canter about those shoes; and you know the Stores never sent the saucepans . . . and I haven't answered Mrs. Queensbury's invitation. I want to get them done before Myra comes."

"Oh, yes, Myra's coming to lunch. She deigns to call in and see us sometimes, Mrs. Blake."

"It must be lovely out in the country on a day like this."

"No doubt it is. Myra very seldom comes in to Marlingate."

"Do you often manage to get out there?"

"No, I don't. Georgie's bicycled over once or twice, but I haven't been since Easter. I don't like travelling so far by motor 'bus. Besides, I must confess that it gives me no pleasure to see the child living like that by herself—not at all what she was brought up to. It's a pretty enough little place and she has friends near her, but I'll be glad when it loses its attraction for her, as no doubt it will soon. Girls like trying to be independent, you know; but they soon get tired of it."

"Is she writing another novel?"

"Oh, yes—she's busy enough."

"I'm glad. I enjoyed the first book so much. . . . Good-bye, Sibylla. Don't forget to come and see me."

Sibylla walked quickly away, poking a little in her spotted summer gown. She was no longer as upright as she used to be, in spite of her mother's repeated injunctions to "hold herself up." Yet she did not look her age, which was nearly five years more than Mrs. Blake had guessed. There was no grey in her brown hair, which lent itself abundantly to the swathing and draping of the year's fashion, her colourless skin was clear and her eyes had an innocent, searching look beneath the anxiety that clouded them.

The 'bus, no longer horse-drawn, stood rattling and steaming at the bottom of High Street, ready for the return journey to New Marlingate. But Sibylla walked past it, halting only when she heard her name called by somebody behind.

"Hullo, Sibylla. Aren't you coming up in the 'bus?"

"No. I thought I'd rather walk today."

"Find it good for the figure?"

"Well, yes . . . and it is rather a bore to have to go through that stuffy, smelly thing."

Directly she had said this, Sibylla had a twinge of regret for one of them. Perhaps they would make her stay longer, and involve her in another of those wranglings which always made her feel so uncomfortable—hot and ashamed of the things she had said and regretful of those other things she might have said if only she had thought of them in time. But luckily Violet's intention was unchanged, though she evidently did not accept Sibylla's reasons for her choice.

"Do as you like, of course. Personally I think it's much too hot for walking. But perhaps you're not going straight home . . . If you're stopping at the church, I'm afraid you won't find Mr. Hardcastle."

"I don't wish to find him."

"That's all right—for he's out playing golf. I saw him go by with his clubs before I started."

"I'm very glad to hear it. It'll do him good to have a little holiday."

"No doubt. But I must say it seems an odd day to choose, with war liable to break out at any moment. Besides, I thought you said people ought to go to church on Bank Holidays. I know you were in church nearly all morning on Whit Monday."

"Whit Monday's different—it's a part of the Whitsun festival. But August Bank Holiday has nothing to do with the Church."

"Oh, really . . . then perhaps not with the war, either. How confusing you must find it all. Good-bye—the 'bus is just going to start," and Violet was gone in a reeking cloud which would not have disgraced the exit of Mephistopheles.

Sibylla stared angrily after her. How like Violet to start a controversy like that at the 'bus stop. She and Violet had been friends for more than twenty years, but it was impossible not to find her exasperating. She was always going through some new phase of self-assertion. At one time she had thought that she could sing—even after she had exposed herself publicly at the Concert Hall she had still thought it. . . . Then had come the time when she fancied herself irresistible to men (though she hadn't had a single proposal or real love-affair) and was always talking about being followed in the street or of infatuated partners at dances. This had given place to her Votes for Women obsession, when she had called herself a feminist and tried to run the local suffrage society; and now, forsooth, she was an agnostic—too intellectual and high-minded to believe in religion,

always sneering at it and arguing about it. It would seem that she had to be whatever Sibylla was not—her mind followed her round and challenged her.

And yet they were friends; something held them together that could not be broken. Sibylla might feel angry with her this morning, but soon she would be wanting to call at the big lonely house in Pelham Square, which now that Mrs. Faircloth was bedridden they had virtually to themselves; and there they would sit and talk and argue and quarrel till Sibylla was angry again. She wished she did not get upset so easily . . . but really some of the things Violet said . . . she could not know how much they teased and hurt. If only she could argue calmly and convincingly, feel as sure of herself as of her facts! . . . She must ask Father Hardcastle to tell her the name of some book that would help her. . . . Her mind found peace as it closed on the idea.

By this time she was half-way up the High Street, turning into the narrow, paved passage that led between the Town Hall and the Police Station to St. Nicholas' churchyard. The clatter and rumble of the street were shut off by old high buildings, and the church, which was the oldest thing in the town, seemed islanded in peace among the gravestones. Sibylla walked quickly under the great yew tree that shadowed the door and entered the cool darkness within. As she did so her heart rose in a sudden song of thanksgiving.

She knelt down in a pew at the back and after a time her eyes became accustomed to the dim light and she was able one by one to discern the loved, familiar objects: the chancel screen—old oak on which still lingered the occasional sunshine of mediæval paint and gilding, the altar with its six tall candlesticks, the Lady Chapel with its blue hangings, and at the end of the south aisle that hallowed spot where, kneeling at a desk beside a Glastonbury chair, she had found at last release.

Her first few moments in St. Nicholas' Church were always spent in grateful recapitulation of the events that had first brought her there. She had now been a member of the congregation for over seven years, but she still relished the contrast between it and All Hallows'—oak instead of pitch pine, artistic mediævalism instead of hideous Victorianism, restful darkness instead of exhausting glare, her own solitude in some anonymous pew instead of the jostled quarters

of the family "sitting," where there was no peace or privacy even for devotion.

Sometimes she feared that her love of St. Nicholas' owed too much to the fact that it was the only place where she was free—where she could live her own life without interference or inspection. She knew how seriously one could be deceived as to one's motives. Violet, of course, said that she was secretly in love with Father Hardcastle and went to church for entirely sexual reasons . . . at the bare thought Sibylla's shoulders contracted and she shuddered. Never could any man on earth feel more safe from her than Mr. Hardcastle. The very idea of his marrying, having any concern with the vulgarities and familiarities of love and domestic life, made her feel almost sick. He was a being apart, dedicated by a vow of celibacy to a life remote from the lives of others. Sometimes she pictured his days of hard work and devotion, his nights of prayer . . . a little fresh air and exercise were necessary sometimes and must require his occasional presence in the town or on the golf course. But he wasn't always going out to tea like Mr. Blake—one hardly ever met him at "At Homes" or garden parties. On the other hand, one saw him constantly in the church, a spare, cassocked figure, kneeling in the chancel or in the Lady Chapel, or sitting in that Glastonbury chair to absolve the sins of penitents like herself. . . .

That was how she had lost her burden—the dreadful burden she had dragged about with her all those years, knowing herself to be sinful and unworthy, a woman who in thought and intention was no better than a harlot, though moving unsuspected among respectable people who would recoil in horror had they known to what her mind had consented. But for the direct intervention of circumstances her body would have followed her mind. Already it had begun the journey in that moment of passion which had followed a kiss. . . . That kiss in her memory had become an orgy and herself the most libidinous of Bacchantes.

It had been the merest chance—she smiled softly at the word—that had first brought her into St. Nicholas' Church. . . . She lived again in that cold rainy dusk, with the wind sighing all over the town and the lamplight shining in the dark mirror of the pavement. She had come out for a breath of air and liberty after an exceptionally trying afternoon. Father really had been terrible . . . he was ill, of course, but that did not make it much easier to bear his taunts and

bullying. "I can't hear you—why do you always read as if you had a plum in your mouth?"—then, when she had stumbled over a foreign word in the newspaper, "Really you girls are almost illiterate. When I think of the money I've spent on your education . . ."

Home, which every popular notion held to be the sweetest place on earth, had seemed to her a veritable prison. She longed to escape, but the only way she knew of was denied to her. She was sure now that she would never marry. She had had her chances—not another proposal, nothing so definite as that to help her hold her chin up through the next decade, but approaches that she had desperately convinced herself would have become offers if she had encouraged them. But how could she encourage a man while she carried this dark secret in her heart?—a secret she could never forget and never tell. The one thing no man will forgive a woman is a flirtation—a love-affair—with a married man. She knew that, for she had heard at least one man say so—that young officer in the Buffs she had met at Kitty's. He had been too young for her, of course, but he would have shown her the common male opinion if she had not already learned it from Philip Janaway. . . . She could not possibly become engaged to anyone under false pretences, and then either let him find out about her from gossip or tell him herself.

That situation had now become purely academic, for by this time she had ceased even to hope. The threat of old-maidenhood came no longer from her thirtieth birthday, but from her fortieth, close at hand. She would have to live at home with her father and mother till the end of their lives, and then, she supposed, she would have to live with Georgie, with whom she had not an idea in common. . . . Of course there was Myra and there was Violet Faircloth; but Myra would probably marry—though not pretty, she was lively and attractive—and Violet would be more difficult to live with than anyone else. The utmost, it seemed, that she could hope for was that she might be allowed to live alone.

All this misery had been in her heart as she walked down Fish Street and then cut across to High Street by the Petty Passageway. She had meant to go down to the sea, but had been lured across the town by the chime of bells. The bells sounded cheerful and friendly, whereas the sea—the roar of which came up to her on the wind—sounded angry and sad as her own heart. She would go over to High

Street and look at the shops, which would still be bright and busy, as it was not yet half-past five.

She had thought at first the bells were only practice. Then she had remembered that tomorrow was All Saints' Day and when she came into the street she saw people crowding under the lamp that lit St. Nicholas' Passage, evidently on their way to church. Something—again she smiled as her thoughts gave her another word—had urged her to follow them. She had heard that St. Nicholas' under its new Rector had become sensationally "high"; it would take her mind off her troubles if she went in to see what happened there.

Inside she had found herself in a new world. Colour, warmth, lights, incense, music, all combined in an atmosphere of fervent devotion and suppressed excitement to form a part of what she had hitherto regarded as a dreary routine. At the end of the service the Rector had gone into the pulpit and preached a sermon which was as far outside Sibylla's experience as all the rest had been. He was a middle-aged man, not at all handsome, but with an attractively austere face and a most unexpected smile. He had not been preaching long before it seemed as if his words were meant for her alone. He spoke of the joys of the coming festival, of humanity's need for joy—of humanity's burden of sin and sorrow. In order to enter into joy we must shed one of these two burdens. The burden of sorrow can be brought into the sanctuary of God, to become a part of joy. But sin can never become a part of joy; the burden of sin must be left outside the church.

"For that reason I shall hear confessions after this service, and I hope that some of you will come who have never been to confession before, who have never known the joys of absolution. So many of us live dark and narrow lives, lives without joy or freedom, lives that perhaps are shadowed by the memory of some past sin. How much happier we should be if we could look forwards instead of always looking backwards—like nervous people who think they hear a ghost behind them, and stumble because they are looking backwards over their shoulders instead of where they are going! . . ."

Sibylla had felt the tears gathering in her eyes as she listened. She had brushed them away, so that she could see him smile as he made the sign of the Cross at the end of the sermon and came down out of the pulpit.

After most of the congregation had left she had remained in her

seat. One by one the lights in the church had gone out. A choir-boy had extinguished the candles on the altar, the light in the chancel had contracted to a red, solitary star, the electric chandeliers snapped down to single bulbs. Only at the end of the south aisle was brightness, light streaming over a white surplice, beyond it a kneeling figure, curtained into anonymity.

No one she knew was in church—St. Nicholas' had always catered for what Monypenny Crescent called the lower orders—and after a time she had changed her place and gone to kneel at the back of the south aisle. One by one the people kneeling in front of her went up into the light and knelt beside the sitting, spliced figure, who leaned towards them, catching the details of the murmur that came from their lips. She knew that they were confessing their sins, as High Church people did—copying the Roman Catholics. Her father disapproved of it very much, and said it gave the priests a truly shocking influence over the people, which they used mainly to extract money. Sibylla did not expect Mr. Hardcastle to ask her for money, and she felt that his influence could only be for good. Nevertheless she was afraid; she did not know what one did when one went to confession. Did one confess everything one had done wrong or only the thing that particularly troubled one? . . . She did not want to appear silly and ignorant—she did not want to go up to that desk at all . . . and yet she knew that she would be miserable—miserable for ever—if she lost her chance.

One by one the people in front of her had grown fewer—for when they had made their confessions they did not come back to the south aisle, but vanished into the darkness of the nave or the greater darkness of the street. Soon it would be her turn to go—or stay . . . the woman in front of her had gone now—she had knelt down—he was listening to her—soon she would have done . . . he moved his hand in what looked like the sign of the Cross—the woman rose, dusting her knees . . . Sibylla's mind was lost in the prosaic gesture before she knew that she herself was in the aisle, walking towards the light.

She had only an inchoate memory of what followed, and she must have given Mr. Hardcastle quite a wrong impression; for he had seemed to think that her wickedness had been altogether more bodily than was actually the case, and she had felt too shy and frightened to correct him. But none of that—though it had embarrassed her at the

time—need trouble her now. The one thing she remembered clearly was his kindness, his sympathy, his spirituality, which had set her feet on a new road, put a new interest and a new inspiration into her life, given her new courage and a new hope.

Once more she had become a new Sibylla and this time a very much better one. Of course there had been terrible rows at home when she insisted on going to St. Nicholas' instead of to All Hallows'. Her father had tried to stop her, but he had not been able. This new Sibylla was very much firmer than either of her predecessors—at least in this particular matter.

"Really, Father, as you can't get out to church now, does it matter to you so much where I go?"

"You ought to go to church with your mother."

"Mother has Georgie and Myra to go with her."

"She ought to have you too. I pay for five sittings—it's bad enough to have only four of them occupied."

"Why not save money and pay for only three?"

"Because I hope soon to be well enough to be able to go out to church myself. You evidently hope nothing of the kind."

"Oh, Father, that isn't true. You know I want you to get better. I was only suggesting that you needn't pay for seats that aren't occupied."

The argument had gone on till it ended in tears. The new Sibylla was not much better at arguing than the old. But though weeping she had gone her own way. She knew that she was right; for Father Hardcastle had told her so. She had consulted him and he had said, "Your parents have no authority to forbid your following your conscience or to interfere with your religious practices. You are a full adult and have the right to choose for yourself. Make up to them by extra affection and attention for seeming to disregard their wishes in this single matter."

She had scrupulously obeyed him, doing all she could, while regularly attending the services at St. Nicholas', to show affection and attention to her father and mother. Unfortunately that did not seem to be what they wanted. They were not demonstrative parents and mistrusted Sibylla in her new rôle. After a time she gave up any outward display, and concentrated on a more complete submission to their wishes on every other point than the one on which she was immovable.

This had made her life in many ways more difficult than it used to be; but for the sake of her one treasure she endured it all as well as she could. That was not always very well—her behaviour to her parents was still at the age of forty her chief stumbling-block and preoccupation. Her father's death made things a little easier for a while, but not for long; because in widowhood her mother seemed to become more demanding and self-assertive. Her domination weighed more heavily than the total rule of husband and wife, and the chief weight fell upon Sibylla. For both Georgie and Myra in varying degrees had broken free. Georgie had found her freedom on the golf-course and, through friends that she had made there, in coaching hockey and cricket at one or two private schools. Her parents had objected, of course, but as she received nothing so vulgar as payment, and as Doctor Miller had recommended an open-air life for certain anæmic symptoms which she had recently shown, they eventually withdrew their opposition.

As for Myra, she of course was very much more emancipated. She had always been different from her sisters, and she had proclaimed that difference immediately on leaving school by writing a book—a novel, which to the great surprise of her family had been accepted by a London publisher, and, to the still greater surprise not only of her family but of everyone in Marlingate, had turned out a success, had run into several editions and brought Myra several hundred pounds—enough for her to buy a little cottage in the country near her friends the Streets, and go there ostensibly for week-ends but actually very much oftener.

Sibylla did not approve of Myra's novel—she had in fact been quite shocked when she read it. It was all about a lovely, fascinating, wicked woman and people who smoked and drank and swore. It was certainly interesting—perhaps that was why it had sold so well—but she did not like to think that a sister of hers, and a sister whom as a child she had loved so much, had written that sort of book—the sort you would expect to be censored by the libraries, like Hall Caine's *The Woman Thou Gavest Me*, and H. G. Wells's *Ann Veronica*. . . . How on earth did Myra know about these things? That was a question that a number of people in Marlingate besides Sibylla had asked, and once or twice she had had very hotly and unskilfully to take her sister's part, to defend her character and the character of her

friends. . . . She hoped to goodness that Myra's new book—the one she was writing now—would be of a different kind. . . .

The presence of Myra in her thoughts showed her how far they had wandered. Myra was coming in to lunch today, and Sibylla had been hurrying home to write letters before she arrived. None of those letters would be written now, for it was already a quarter to one. She hoped Mother would not ask about them. What could she say? That she had met Violet Faircloth? . . . No, that would be quite as bad as telling a lie. She would have to be open and say she had called in at the church and lost count of the time. Mother had got used to the church by now, and Myra would be there—Myra would take her part.

She dropped her head in her hands and prayed. She prayed that she might not fail in her duty, that she might always be cheerful, pleasant and helpful, unselfish . . . "and not so easily upset by little things." All her most frantic prayers were for help in the daily round that she found so difficult. The big shadow had been removed from her life, and that life most marvellously transfigured. She must show her gratitude by perseverance in those narrow domestic paths which should be, but were not, all sunshine now.

It was not till she was about to leave the church that she remembered a larger duty and remained on her knees a few moments longer to pray for her country, threatened with the catastrophe of war—trying hard not to think just how little or how much that war would affect the contractions and enlargements of her own life.

The last war (though so far away and affecting them all so lightly) had been on the enlarging side; indeed it had opened a door on the abyss. . . . Sibylla shuddered and then gave thanks. She dared not hope that this war would open many doors, to danger or otherwise. It seemed more likely to shut such as were already open—banging them close as if it were a great wind blowing round the house.

## II

**M**YRA never entered Marlingate from the country without thinking how beautiful it was in the distant view. As she rumbled down the London Road towards the first scattered houses of New Marlingate, the town lay before her in the hollow like a nosegay. The red roofs cupped by the tamarisk slopes of the hills were like a

bunch of roses in a ring of ferns. It was not a prim or orderly nosegay, for to one side of it clustered the pale houses of the new town, a spray of lilies . . . one had also to shut one's eyes to the little sordid slatey streets that climbed the Totty Lands towards the waterworks. . . . But the general effect was of natural colour and loveliness, especially on a day like this, when the sunshine steeped it all and the purple shadows of the white flocks in the sky moved with the wind over the sea—the sea that seemed both to close the view and open it on unknown spaces beyond.

She left the 'bus at the Town Park and walked up to Monypenny Crescent. Here again her eye was pleased. The houses, though Victorian in date, had been built in a Georgian style, as part of the white town which the by-gone Mayor after which it was named had dreamed of and then abandoned. They had been designed by an enlightened young architect, who not only had preferred a simple classical style to the tortured elaborations of his contemporaries, but had preserved as much as he could of the woodland site on which the houses stood. In the garden of each was imprisoned a single, woodland tree, and a condition of tenancy was that this tree should in no circumstances be cut down. The tree at the back of number four was an ash, which had been but a sapling when the house was built, but had now risen high above the roof and arched its drooping grace from wall to wall. Mrs. Landless often complained about "the tree" and the way its spreading roots interfered with her flowers, while its boughs darkened the back windows; but Myra was always glad to see it there, a green background and a grateful shade.

As she arrived at the gate, she heard footsteps hurrying along the pavement behind her, and turned round to see her eldest sister.

"Hullo, Sibylla."

"Hullo, Myra. What time is it? I'd meant to get back before you came."

"It's only just one. How are you? How's everybody?"

"Oh, quite well—only worried, of course. Have you heard any fresh news?"

"None. I'm hoping to take some back with me."

"Well, there's nothing much yet. I managed to get a paper in the town, but there was really nothing in it that wasn't in the *Morning Post*. . . . I wonder if Mother's come back."—She seemed relieved to find that she had not.—"Will you excuse me while I go and write one

or two notes? I want to get them done before lunch if possible. Georgie's back, I see. There are her golf-clubs."

She hurried off, and Myra, who had no immediate desire to see Georgie, went up to her own bedroom. Poor Sibylla—how she fusses . . . and she treats me as if I were a visitor instead of one of the family. Well, in a sense, so I am—thank heaven! . . . She looked round the room which had been in turns her nursery, her schoolroom and her bedroom, and sighed deeply with content at its dismantled air. She would never, if she could possibly by any shifts maintain her independence, live at Monypenny Crescent again. The outside of the house, especially in classical line with its neighbours, might charm her, but the inside was black depression—not merely on account of the furniture, though that was old-fashioned and inappropriate, but because of the memories and associations that crowded it still more cumbrously. Sometimes in her dreams she found herself imprisoned there, and woke in gasping relief to savour the freedom of her blue-and-white bedroom at Winter Land Cottage. . . . Not that she had ever been ill-treated or really unhappy as a child, but her growing life had been suffocated by the weight of other, heavier lives. Her earliest ambition had been to break free, and now her chief desire was to maintain that freedom.

She had no illusions about the novel that had opened the prison doors. Already, at a remove of less than two years from its completion, she saw it as crude stuff—the projection of a childish day-dream into adolescent tastes and enthusiasms. Ivy Bethersden had achieved the embodiment of paper and print. As Lorna Hayward she had delighted thousands and shocked some thousands more. For a long time Ivy Bethersden had been deteriorating from the heroic conditions of her childhood. Even before she became Lorna she had learned a surprising amount of bad language, with which she relieved the more painful irritations of her creator's life. As Lorna she not only swore, but drank and indulged in some dark and hectic love-affairs involving a liberal use of asterisks. Myra already felt faintly ashamed of her youth's companion, whom she had now written completely out of her system. Her new book was about somebody quite different—a man, a rather high-minded, idealistic man. . . . Standing at the window of her forsaken bedroom, looking out into the trellis of the ash, she suddenly thought: What'll I do if the war stops my writing?—if it kills my book?

The question was almost too shocking to answer and she pushed it out of her mind. Impossible to tell what war would do till war had begun—and perhaps it would never begin. There was always a chance that the world would be saved at the last moment and the life she was enjoying, which had already provided so many opportunities for change and adventure, go on its pleasant, exhilarating way. How differently she felt now from what she had felt before the Boer War in 1899! She threw back an amused, half-pitying glance at the barbarous child whose only fear had been that something would happen to preserve the peace. She could remember her relief when she had heard that British troops had marched into the Transvaal . . . geographically, it had all been very far away, but how deeply, consumingly near to her heart! While now . . . She turned away from her older face in the glass and walked out of the room with a sigh.

Her mother had come in and was scolding Georgie for leaving her golf-clubs in the hall.

"Well, Myra—how are you, child? You're looking thin."

"Thinner than usual?"

"I don't know about that; but you don't look well, and I don't see how you can expect it, living the way you do."

"Whatever I look like, I never felt better in my life," said Myra firmly. "How are you, Georgie?—still in good form?"

"I wasn't up to much today, but nor were the others. I think this morning's news enough to spoil anybody's stroke."

Myra quoted:

*"I was playing golf the day that the Germans landed.  
All our troops had run away, all our ships were stranded;  
And the thought of England's shame  
Very nearly spoilt my game."*

"Myra!" cried her mother, "how can you repeat such stuff? I dare say you think it's very clever and witty and all that sort of thing, but I think it's disgraceful, and if that's what you learn in the literary world, all I can say is that I'm sorry you ever wrote that book."

The luncheon gong roared out over Myra's reply, drowning all of it except the smile.

"Let's go in at once," said Mrs. Landless. "Where's Sibylla?"

Sibylla came hurrying down the stairs.

"I was finishing my letters. . . ."

"Well, let's go in. . . . Maggie, there was no need to put out a clean table-napkin for Miss Myra. She can't have used that last one more than twice."

They sat down like the four winds at the four quarters of the huge dining-room table, which with its sea of snowy damask and ships of shining silver seemed to ignore the wreck of a leg of lamb set before Mrs. Landless at the north end. Sibylla in the south unskilfully dressed a salad of lettuce and cucumber, while Maggie, very much less starched than many of her predecessors, boxed the compass with the plates and a dish of boiled potatoes. Her mother's attitude to the visiting daughter was not like Sibylla's and everything had been designed, Myra could see, to impress her with the fact that she was an ordinary member of the family eating Monday's cold joint in her proper place. The merest suspicion of guest-ship and the cold meat would have found a substitute in chicken or cutlets, with potatoes fried or mashed to correspond and a dish of green peas. Well, never mind . . . she was safe and could afford to laugh at her mother's strategy. She was of age and had her own cottage and her own money. As long as that lasted . . .

"What does Mr. Street think about things?" asked Mrs. Landless. "I suppose he thinks it'll be war."

"Oh, yes, I'm afraid . . . everybody does."

"And how many sons has he got?"

"Three—Toby, Arthur and Eric."

"All old enough for the Army, I dare say."

"Yes—or the Navy. By the way, has anyone heard from Kitty? I expect she's feeling worried about Hugh."

"Why should she feel worried? She's a soldier's wife."

"That's the very reason why I thought she might feel worried."

"Now, Myra, don't talk to me like that. I don't know what's come over you lately—you're always trying to be smart. It's your clever literary friends, I suppose. I shall begin to feel sorry you ever wrote that book if it's going to make you talk disrespectfully to your mother."

"Sorry, Mother—I didn't mean anything disrespectful. I was only feeling sorry for Kitty, with her husband probably going overseas to fight."

"She's got the children—she can bring them here if she likes. I was often left alone with you children when your father was fighting far away overseas in India."

Myra forbore to say that the coming war was likely to be very different from any frontier skirmish her father might have been engaged in. Instead she remarked:

"Well, one comfort is that we seem to be prepared on the naval side. It's a lucky thing that all this should find us with the Navy mobilized. That comes of having a man like Winston Churchill at the Admiralty."

"And I hope we get Kitchener at the War Office—that they won't let him go away back to Egypt."

"He was one of my childhood heroes, I remember," said Myra. "I used to wear a button with his picture on it during the South African War. If he goes to the War Office, I hope he'll have changed his ideas a little since then."

"His ideas? Why should he?—he did splendidly."

"Yes, he did—then and there; but I imagine things are very different now. I mean the German Army, with all its modern equipment and new inventions, must be a very different proposition from the Boers."

"They used Gatling-guns in the Boer War."

"They'll use aeroplanes in this one."

"And Zeppelins," said Sibylla. "The Germans might actually come over here."

"Well, I expect Lord Kitchener realizes that," said Georgie.

"I expect he does," said Myra. "I hope he does. But there must be a tendency among generals to get stuck in the technique of their best period. You find it in anyone who's had any success—authors who can't change their style and women who can't change their hairdressing."

It was characteristic of Mrs. Landless that she should dislike anything resembling a conversation. Desultory talk with pontifical pronouncements by herself was her idea of family intercourse at the luncheon table, and if anything else started she did not scruple to interrupt it.

"How is Mrs. Street off for servants, Myra? Can she manage to get decent girls in the country?"

The trees measured barely half their height in shadow when Myra drove back to Winter Land. She had left Monypenny Crescent directly after tea, already thirsty for the freedom she had made for herself

outside the town. She felt sorry for Georgie and Sibylla, but there was really nothing that she could do for them in the way of escape that they could not do for themselves, if only they would. They had both done a little—Georgie had made a little world of games and friends inside the more dominant sphere of the family, and Sibylla had made her church-going into a rather unlikely point of defence. But they were both entirely under their mother's rule—they seemed unable to assert themselves except in the most futile, exasperating way. . . . Their attitude to their mother was the attitude of children, except that they did not find in her the comfort and protection that a real child will find even in a domineering parent. They seemed to have carried all the debts of childhood into their middle-age without its gifts.

Of the two she felt more pity for Sibylla, because she also felt more love. Sibylla was a more lovable character than Georgie, and more tragic. Why had she never married? She had a warm, affectionate, even—Myra suspected—a passionate nature and she had always been good-looking. At forty-five she still had certain remains of beauty. . . . But she had never married, never been engaged, probably never had more than the one proposal that she mentioned from time to time. Kitty had done her best for her, and Kitty had given her up in despair. . . . It's no good, Myra, I can't do anything for her and I can't do anything with her. I don't know whether it's because she scares away the men or what it is . . . and now, of course, she's too old. I couldn't possibly push her off on to a subaltern and all the older men are married. It's too late.

Kitty had done her best for Myra too, but it was soon agreed between them that she would not do for a soldier's wife. She had enjoyed going to regimental dances and had always had plenty of partners, for she was a good dancer and a lively talker; but when it came to the idea of anything more permanent she realized that she scared these young men as much as they bored her, and the appearance of her novel put both sides into headlong flight. Myra, in the first intoxication of success, found the men she met at literary parties very much more congenial than the men she had met at dances, and it was many months before Kitty's subalterns recovered from their fear of being "put into a book."

Myra hoped that eventually she would marry, but was in no hurry to do so. She wanted to look about her, see more of life and take her choice. She might also in time be able to settle which side of her

nature she wanted most to satisfy—the restless, experimental side that she had expressed in Lorna Hayward or the tranquil, thoughtful tendencies that had found happiness for her in Winter Land Cottage. At present it was a tug-of-war. She wanted to live in the country, to have the fields about her, to watch the seasons trail their coloured coats over the woods, to wake to that morning view across the Tillingham, where the tops of trees and the roofs of farms swam together above the mist like the distant shore of some unearthly sea. But her imagination could not take root there—it germinated only in streets and drawing-rooms, and its rather hectic flower smelt of petrol and tobacco and even, she suspected, of the midnight oil. Her writing was inevitably, like her childhood's day-dreams, a projection of herself into a strange, more exciting environment, and she could not decide if she would be finally happier following her imagination as it were to town or in bringing it into the fold of the countryside she loved.

At that moment, jolting between the tawny summer hedges in the 'bus that now held only herself and the western sunshine, her heart was in the country, resting in simple, solid things, far away from her imagination. Here were at once her home and her escape—there, in that other world, only the means that had led to these ends. Here she had friends, there only agreeable companionships; here she had work, there only play. She could not write about the country, but neither could she write in the town.

The 'bus had left her at the top of Watt's Palace Lane, and she walked slowly down for a hundred yards to the gate of Winter Land Cottage. It was on the opposite side of the lane from the farm, and invisible from it, indeed invisible from any other house; for it was built all on one floor and only its chimney challenged the supremacy of the trees and bushes round it. A big cherry-tree hung over the roof, which it covered with spring snows of blossom; on one side of the door a lilac-bush made scent and shade in June, while from the other a twisted stem of wistaria rose to dangle purple fringes above the casements that were afterwards nearly lost in its green veil. The garden was only a tiny patch of grass and cottage flowers. For vegetables she depended on the farm.

With a deep sigh of content she walked in (the door was never locked) and looked round at her books, her pictures, her few good pieces of furniture. Everything was as she wished it in these four rooms—instead of as other people wished it. Her memory clouded

with a picture from her childhood—a huge, yellow, shiny chest of drawers, with hideous white handles, which her mother had insisted on putting in her room at Monypenny Crescent, taking away the neat little chest she liked so much, saying that she wanted it for some other room . . . in that moment of unavailing tears had been sown the seed that was flowering now at Winter Land in antique furniture and Heal cretonnes.

Her growing desire had been for a place of her own, no matter how humble and small, a place in her own beloved piece of country where she could be by herself and have what she liked around her. The seven hundred pounds which were Lorna Hayward's first surprising gift had all been spent on buying, repairing and furnishing Winter Land Cottage. It had lain derelict for some years—ever since the Lusted boys had reached an age to help their father on the farm and enable him to do without hired labour—and the builder whom she confronted with it had at first declared that reclamation was impossible. But finding that nothing more was required of the place than habitation—that his client was not imagining some hidden wealth of oak or treasury of antique fireplaces, he caught a little of her enthusiasm and the cottage had been made into a good, sound, serviceable little home, with plenty of whitewash, and an oak varnish to disguise the new deal floors.

Of course her mother had objected. She seemed especially to dislike the idea of Myra living so near Winter Land Farm. She had disapproved of the Lusteds ever since their daughter left her service in disgrace, and though Rose had now been married for some years to a most respectable farmer over at Rushmonden in Kent, she still pursed her mouth when either she or her family was mentioned.

She had particularly resented Myra's engagement of the youngest Lusted girl as her daily help. Queenie Lusted had been born shortly after Rose's return to Winter Land, and was almost certainly not her sister. Mrs. Street, who had a wide and uncensorious knowledge of local affairs, said that it was no uncommon thing for a respectable woman, still of childbearing age, to mother an erring daughter's baby in order to avoid scandal. The neighbourhood, including Myra, accepted Queenie without comment or criticism. She was a pretty, blooming girl, who had only just left school, but was perfectly capable of doing all those parts of the housework which her employer disliked—that is, everything except the cooking.

Myra walked into the kitchen now, glanced approvingly at her blue enamel saucepans, and hesitated. It was too early yet to prepare supper—unless she meant to cook herself a more elaborate meal than usual. She felt tempted to do so after luncheon at Monypenny Crescent—cold meat and cold tart, still gaping with Sunday's wounds . . . the memory of them stirred her to see what she could do with the remains of a boiled fowl in her larder. But a further inspection showed bank-holiday shortages that would thwart her ambitions. . . . She had better be satisfied with an omelet and some fruit. Besides, she ought not to spend her time cooking—she was a writer, and in the past these evening hours of fading gold and creeping shadows had been a specially fruitful time. She had not written at all to-day. . . .

Moving into her sitting-room she looked down at her writing-table, at the small heap of manuscript, the painful whiteness of the virgin writing-block, the fountain-pen beside it, the scribbling-pad, the pencil, the piece of indiarubber. It was all laid out with the orderliness of an unready writer—it looked unused; it had not been used that day. As soon as she was up she had gone out into the garden, to mow her little lawn and pick roses and phlox for the vases; she had made toast and coffee and breakfasted out of doors; she had gossiped with Queenie and the old postman, she had walked to Copstreet for the newspaper, and read it sitting under a tree. Then it had been time to set out for Marlingate; she had told herself that she would write when she came home.

But she did not want to write. She would rather cook, or read, or go out and call on her neighbours. Should she go over to Ellenwhorne and see if Mr. Street had brought home any real news about the war? She knew that he had been to Rye that morning—he might have heard something more recent and important than the stuff which the newspapers ground out in their hourly editions; stuff that seemed always the same and yet, like the infinitely small variations in the separate photographs of a cinema film, was slowly building up a single movement of disaster. If only she could see the picture that must finally and inevitably be! . . . She picked up her hat, which she had taken off on entering the cottage, but the next moment she put it down again. This was all nonsense—just an excuse for not doing her work. Mr. Street was most unlikely to have heard any vital news in Rye. She had better sit down at once and write and forget about the war that

threatened her writing. . . . She shivered as she realized that the threat was not only to her work but to her independence.

The next day she was not surprised to hear that the war had begun. She had expected it to be declared when the ultimatum to Germany expired at midnight, and Queenie's news, delivered with the importance due to it, failed to rouse all the emotions anticipated.

"Well, I always thought it would be."

"And the Territorials are going off to fight at once. Mr. Borrer told Dad he was upset because Clarence's gone and not even had time to give proper notice to Mr. Henderson. It doesn't seem right."

"I expect a good number of the young men around here will have gone away before it's all over."

"Dad says it'll be over by Christmas."

"Does he? I only hope he's right. You might do my study before you start anything else today, Queenie. I want to begin work directly after breakfast."

"Won't you be going out for the paper, miss?"

"No—I'll wait till Beathope sends it."

This would not be till the afternoon, but now that her uncertainty was over, Myra felt she did not want to see a newspaper. The worst had happened and any comment on it was superfluous, any journalistic enlargement of it outrageous. Later on, perhaps, she would go to Ellenwhorne and talk things over with Mrs. Street, but at the present moment she wanted the solitude necessary for her escape into another world. She only hoped that she would not find that world so difficult to enter as she had found it yesterday.

She sat down opposite the gateway of the white writing-block. Only one page torn off and added to the pile of manuscript marked yesterday's progress. She picked up her pen—the pen moved and an eighth or so of the whiteness disappeared. Then her pen hovered suspended over the sheet, while her head, with the chin supported in her hand, turned away from it to search the moving shadows on the wall for the words and actions of a self-seeking, irresponsible woman about to marry a man whom she respects rather than loves. The shadows on the wall seemed at first a part of her own mind, the shifting, dim material of invention, an arabesque of passing thought; but as she searched them they became themselves, the fluttering twigs and leaves of the cherry-tree, and she sat watching a bird perch among them, preen his

breast and fly away. A gust of wind came and tossed the whole nearly up to the ceiling; then as the boughs sank, a man's head and shoulders suddenly blocked them out. She turned round and saw Toby Street looking in at the open window.

"Hullo!" she cried almost gaily, so great was the relief of being interrupted.

"You're busy—I'm going away."

"No; I'm not busy. I can't write this morning. Do come in and talk to me."

She no longer wanted to escape—certainly not by such a difficult road. She would rather stay and face the situation with Toby. He would almost certainly be as sensible and satisfactory to talk to as his mother.

"Do come in," she said again as he still hesitated.

"Sure I shan't be a nuisance?"

"Perfectly sure."

He came in—through the window, sliding a long leg over the sill. Soon they were both lounging deeply in armchairs, he with his pipe, she with a cigarette.

"Seen the papers this morning?"

"No; I couldn't be bothered to go as far as Beathope's, so I'll wait till he sends them round. I heard the news from Queenie."

"That it's war."

"Yes."

He puffed for a while in silence and she watched him with pleasure. He had what she called a country face—blunt features, weathered skin, eyes blue as the sea in Rye Bay. It was not the face of the district, being at once broader and more alert, but it gave an impression of health and outdoor exposure which belonged to the country rather than to the town. His hair was a golden-brown thatch, his teeth a white surprise—he showed them very little when he talked and smiled suddenly and rarely.

"I shall go, of course," he said.

The silence had lasted so long that she had lost the thread of talk.

"Go?—where?"

"To fight. I shall join the Army."

"Oh! . . ." She could not help feeling startled, for his words seemed to bring the war from across the sea right into the very fields

of Winter Land and Ellenwhorne. "Will your father be able to manage without you?"

"Yes—perfectly well. Besides . . . even if he couldn't I'd have to go. I can't let this sort of thing go on and me not be in it."

"But, Toby, I can't imagine you fighting."

"Can't you? I don't know that I can either. They'll have to train me, of course."

"How will you set about it? Do you mean to enlist?"

"Yes. They're opening recruiting stations in London—I'm going up by the afternoon train."

Again she said: "Oh! . . ." The war seemed to have come closer in time as well as in space—as close as this afternoon.

"I might get a commission eventually," he went on, as she said no more. "But I shan't wait for that. I want to get started at once."

She forced herself to be less inadequate.

"I'm sorry to be so stupid about it all; but you've surprised me, rather. . . . I never thought you'd feel like this. You never used to be specially adventurous or patriotic."

"I don't know that I am adventurous—in fact I know I'm not; and as for being patriotic . . ."

He broke off, knitting his forehead into a familiar frown as he puzzled out the meaning of the word.

"Somehow I always thought," she continued, "that if it came to joining the Army, either Arthur or Eric would be the one to go, and you'd be the one who'd stand by Ellenwhorne and help your father keep it above water during the bad times that are coming."

He shook his head.

"I don't believe there are bad times coming—to farms. I haven't really any idea as to how a war like this will affect the country as a whole, but I imagine that we're sure to have to rely more on home-grown stuff. The German Navy will attack our shipping—perhaps stop our imports altogether for a while. . . . I should think Dad would find things looking up a bit on the farm. As for Arthur, I dare say he'll go too. We haven't any of us talked about it yet."

"Do you want to go?"

He gave her the surprise of his smile.

"Well, I do and I don't. I'm not the military sort and I dislike the idea of military discipline and military life, and as for bayonets and bombs and such, I simply can't imagine what it's like to use them."

But on the other hand I want to do something—I want to get up close to things. This is going to be a big show and I want to—I must—be in it."

She felt an unexpected pang of envy.

"You're quite right, Toby. I think I understand you now. I'm like you—I don't really know what this war means. We've never had anything like it in our lifetime—in our parents' lifetime. This is really going to be big. I wish I could be in it too. If I could, perhaps I shouldn't dread it so much."

"Do you dread it, Myra?"

"Yes, of course I do. I don't mean that I think the Germans are going to invade us or anything like that, though perhaps they will. . . . It isn't the war I'm afraid of, so much as the effects of war—what it will do to me personally. I know that sounds petty and selfish, but you must remember that I'm in a very different position from you. You're a man and can do things; I can't, because I'm a woman, so I'm afraid of what they can do to me."

He did not answer for a few moments and she was afraid that she had struck him not only as self-centered but as artificial and literary. Perhaps she had, for after a while he said:

"You mean it may interfere with your writing?"

"Yes; it's sure to do that—not so much the actual writing, though Lord knows that's difficult enough, as the production side of it. Even if I'm able to get the book finished I mayn't be able to get it published. It's only my second novel and I haven't a firm contract."

"But *Palace People* was such a success."

"It was; but goodness knows if it's enough to carry me through into war-time. The British public will probably want to read nothing but newspapers, or serious books about the war. Besides, I imagine that every sort of trading activity will stop—people will be short of money and certainly not want to spend it on books."

Again he crumpled his forehead.

"I hadn't thought of all that. I suppose it will happen—at least it may. I'm terribly sorry, Myra dear."

"You're nice to be so sympathetic, Toby, and I don't know that I deserve it, because I've no business to be thinking of myself at a time like this. But you see my whole life is involved in it—not just the literary side. If I can't write I can't earn, and if I can't earn I can't

go on living here. I'll have to go back to Marlingate and live with Mother and the girls, and I—I simply can't face it."

Her voice nearly broke, and he sat up, gripping the arms of his chair.

"Oh, Myra . . . surely it needn't come to that."

"It must if I can't afford to keep myself. Mother would never make me an allowance to live away from home, even if she could afford it. She never liked my coming to Winter Land Cottage and she'd be only too glad if something happened that would compel me to give it up. Of course I might be able to hang on for a bit at week-ends only, but that wouldn't be the same. I should have to spend the greater part of my time with the family, and, Toby, that would be simply hellish after being on my own. You see, my family isn't like yours. For one thing, there are no men in it, for another the two elder girls—women, I mean—haven't married and are still living at home under my mother's thumb, just as if they were children. If I lived at home she'd try to bully me too, and I wouldn't put up with it like them, so there'd be endless rows, which would make things even worse. Mother usen't to be so bad when Father was alive, but since he died she's had her head and become quite a tyrant . . . it's partly Sibylla's and Georgie's fault for never standing up to her. Their grovelling makes her more aggressive and her aggressiveness makes them grovel. It's a sort of vicious circle and I don't want—I absolutely refuse to be caught in it."

He looked almost shocked.

"It sounds dreadful. I'd no idea families could be like that."

"Yours couldn't. It's only when they're composed of grown-up women who ought to have married and haven't. Marlingate's full of them—that's why I hate it so. It's a beautiful town, but it's rotten because it's full of decayed families. I don't mean the fishing people, or the trippers, but the Anglo-Indians and retired professionals who've settled there and failed to marry their daughters. They'll probably stay on, with dwindling incomes, till the last daughter dies. I feel if I go back I may never get away, but end up there as the last Landless girl, aged eighty-two . . ."

The tension snapped and they both laughed. Then Toby said:

"You know that you need never end up as Miss Landless—not unless you'd rather do that than as Mrs. Street."

"Oh, Toby! . . ."

He had said things like this before, only more vaguely. She was not surprised, but she was distressed, because she had at the moment not the slightest wish to marry him, and yet she did not want him to go away—perhaps for ever—disappointed of any hope or help that she could give him.

“I mean that I’ve been loving you more and more all these last months that we’ve been seeing such a lot of each other. I feel that I could never be happy if I was quite sure that you would never be my wife. Oh, don’t say that it’s impossible . . .”

She was touched by his humility.

“Of course it’s not impossible. Only——”

“I’m not asking for anything definite now. It wouldn’t be right . . . not till the war’s over. But if I could only feel that I had something—so much to hope for. . . . You see, what makes it so difficult is that I’d never meant to speak to you so soon as this. I know you’re not ready. But now I’m going away and have no idea when I shall be back or what may happen . . . it sounds silly and I’m saying it all very badly, but I don’t want us to part just as friends.”

“Oh, Toby, I know—I understand and I’m touched and grateful. It’s sweet of you to feel like that about me. But quite honestly I can’t—can’t promise anything——”

“I don’t want you to promise anything—except to think things over and let me write to you as I feel . . . I mean not trying to hide what I feel.”

“You shall certainly do that.”

He coloured with pleasure.

“Oh, Myra, I’m so glad—and you *are* sweet . . .” He broke off and his colour glowed deeper. “There’s just one thing more.”

“What is it?”

“Will you let me kiss you good-bye?”

“Why, of course.” She very nearly added: “I should have expected that anyhow,” but fortunately stopped in time. It would have taken some of his pleasure away if he had thought her too casual or too free. “You’re not going now, are you?” as he stood up.

“Yes. I must get back home and talk things over with Mother and Dad. But I felt I had to see you first.”

She did not want him to build unwarranted hopes on a kiss which was remarkable to her only in the fact that he had not already taken it without asking. In a confusion between the wish to send

him away happy and the fear of sending him away too confident she stood up and offered him her check. At first she wondered if he would be content with that, but he made no attempt to find her mouth. Instead, having kissed her, he laid his own cheek against hers, and stood motionless with his arm round her waist. She could feel him trembling.

“Toby . . .” she whispered, moved in spite of herself.

“Myra, dear Myra—good-bye. I’ll write soon.” He strained her to him for a moment and then was gone—through the window, the way he had come in.

### III

**T**OWARDS the middle of August Kitty brought her children to Marlingate. Their arrival at Monypenny Crescent was nearly as big an event as the war, and for the first time Mrs. Landless felt glad of Myra’s empty room. Like many women who have shown no very deep affection for their own children, she was passionately proud and fond of her grandchildren and spoilt them as determinedly as she had ruled her daughters.

Betty and Michael were now thirteen and ten years old, pleasant children, if self-willed and expecting a great deal more from life than their aunts had ever dared to hope for. Betty had been attending a day-school near Colchester, while Michael was at a preparatory school on the Devonshire coast; it was now Kitty’s intention to send her daughter to a boarding-school while she went to London “to do war work.”

This arrangement disappointed Mrs. Landless, who would have liked to keep Kitty and the children with her till the end of the war.

“In times like these I think we ought all to be together. I’m sure it’s what Hugh would have wished.”

Hugh had been sent to France, and Mrs. Landless always talked of him as if he were in another world. Kitty determinedly brought him back into this.

“He doesn’t, Mother. He wants the children to be at school, and it’s much more convenient for his leaves if I’m in London.”

“But where will you stay? You’ll be dreadfully lonely.”

"I shan't be lonely at all—I know crowds of people in London; and I shall stay at my Club till I can find a little flat."

"A flat will be very expensive; you'd much better stay here—you'll find it far more comfortable. And there's lots of war work for you to do in Marlingate. Sibylla and Georgie go to the Red Cross twice a week to make bandages."

"Oh, Mother dear, don't tease. I've settled it all with Hugh—it's what we both want. So let it alone."

Her mother would not have tolerated such a reply from Georgie or Sibylla, but Kitty had long been outside the orbit of her commands. She had now been married fourteen years and had reached the age of thirty-four without losing either her high spirits or that flower-like loveliness for which so many had prophesied an early fading. It is true that her beauty was no longer completely unadorned. Times had changed and even her mother had to accept the fact that Kitty powdered her nose, while those uncharitable gossips who in the past had whispered of the cigarettes that today she smoked in public, now whispered darkly of "paint." Indeed on her dressing-table lay quite openly a little box with a flowery label proclaiming "Ashes of Roses," and Sibylla suspected the even more daring application of a tube of lip-salve which she had found in her sister's drawer when putting away her handkerchiefs.

Sibylla sometimes could not help envying Kitty. She knew that it was wrong—one of the many impulses in her life that must be fought against—but she could not always escape a painful thrust of the green lance when she saw her so successful as a woman—the still lovely wife of a brave and handsome husband, the mother of two healthy, intelligent children. It is true that at present the husband was away and in danger of his life, while the home which he and the children had made was broken up and might possibly never be re-established. But even if Hugh were killed—and Kitty was always so fortunate that Sibylla could not imagine he would be—it would not alter that fact that she had been for fourteen years a happy wife and would still have her success proclaimed in her children.

Apart from their significance as trophies, Sibylla did not envy Kitty the possession of Betty and Michael. She neither understood nor particularly cared for children—her early devotion to Myra now seemed to her unreal and faintly repulsive, a part of the general aberration of her youth—and she was heartily glad to find that these two were not to

become permanent inmates of number four Monypenny Crescent. The presence of children, with their demands and restraints, was a contraction rather than an enlargement of its ways; and she looked forward to the day when the Spellman family would all be gone—envy and responsibility removed together.

They stayed till near the end of September, through all the anxieties of the British retreat from Mons, the more personal of which were relieved when a field telegram brought Kitty the reassurance that Sibylla had always expected. While she was in Marlingate she went twice a week with her elder sisters to the empty house in Pelham Square which was now the headquarters of the local Red Cross. Violet Faircloth had offered the drawing-room floor of her mother's house for this purpose and was deeply offended when it was refused.

"Really it isn't necessary to take a whole house. I call it most extravagant."

"There's a lot of work, you know—and it's growing."

"Well, at a push I could have let them have two floors. And I should have thought they'd find it convenient to have properly furnished rooms, and a helper always in residence."

This, Sibylla knew, was the very reason why the offer had been declined.

"It would have been rather disturbing for your mother, having so many people continually going in and out."

"Oh, Mother doesn't notice a thing. She wouldn't know if the whole place blew up," said Violet cheerfully. "Still, if Mrs. Parkinson doesn't want convenient Headquarters it's no affair of mine; though I must say I think they ought to have the water laid on—it's so awkward if one wants to go to the lavatory. Not that I shall work there much longer. There are too many Red Cross workers tumbling over one another in this town. I think I shall open a canteen."

"Who for?"

"The soldiers, of course. Haven't you heard that we've got a number of Belgian soldiers coming to Marlingate?"

"But they're all casualties and going to the hospital."

"I expect they'll be glad of a canteen just the same."

Soon the idea received further stimulation from the report that masses of Russian troops were pouring through Britain on their way to France. They had been seen in Edinburgh, London, Newcastle,

Cheltenham, Norwich, Penzance, and would doubtless soon arrive in Marlingate. Violet felt encouraged to hire an empty shop on the Marine Parade and organize a small rest-room and reading-room, with cups of tea and slices of cake, for any troops there might be in the town. A few Belgian soldiers in blue hospital uniforms dropped in occasionally and asked for wine, but not a single Russian had appeared by the time the venture closed at the end of December.

While it lasted Sibylla went twice a week to help Violet serve tea and wash up. Rosalind Pym-Barrett also came now and then to thrill any Belgian soldier who might be there, and could understand her French, with an account of her journey home from Switzerland just before the outbreak of war. Dolly, the only unmarried Morison, and Mrs. Geoffrey Morison who had once been Grace Janaway, also took their turn. It was a poor remnant of what had once been their own special set, but it had a stimulating effect on Violet, making her snuff new enterprises in the cupboard of past triumphs.

"This is quite like old times," she said, as they all sat together in the basket chairs that the Belgian soldiers should have occupied. "Do you remember the South African War, girls, and all that money we raised for it by producing *Patience*. Don't you think we might do something like that again?"

"Don't you think we're rather too old?" said Grace Morison with a faint smile.

"I don't see how we can go on any stage and sing 'Twenty years hence we shall be twenty lovesick maidens still' without making the audience laugh," said Dolly.

"Oh, of course I didn't mean we should do *Patience* again," said Violet. "We might choose *The Mikado* this time, as a compliment to Japan."

"And which of us is to be Yum-Yum?" asked Grace.

"Oh, Grace dear, don't *sneer*. Of course I didn't mean we should play the juvenile parts. We should have to find some quite young girls for those. But I could be Katisha and you others could be the men; I'm sure Sibylla's tall enough to play the Mikado himself, and Rosalind could be Ko-Ko and Dolly or Grace Pooh-Bah—Japanese dress makes it all so convenient. Except for your brother, Rosalind, there's practically not a man left in Marlingate. It was difficult enough to find men for *Patience*, but now it would be quite impossible."

"Which seems a very strong objection to producing a Gilbert and

Sullivan opera," said Grace. "For, whatever we look like, I don't see how we're to sing tenor and baritone parts. Besides, I think it would be just as difficult to find any girls. This is getting more and more an old-people's town. By the way, Sibylla, what is your sister Myra doing? Is she still living in her cottage?"

"Yes—she's still there."

"Doesn't she do any war work?" asked Violet.

"Yes, of course she does." Sibylla coloured angrily in the defence of the sister she disapproved of; really there was no need for Violet to have put the question in that way. "She goes every week to the Red Cross dépôt at Bewbush Manor."

"I thought Lawrie Buckrose sold the place when his father died."

"He didn't sell it—he let it; and it's a hospital now."

"All right, Sibylla dear, you needn't jump down my throat. I'm glad the Buckroses have still got it—it's their family place. Do you remember Mr. Buckrose at our dances, girls? How he used to romp about in the kitchen lancers and how his wife used to glare at him? . . . Oh, how I wish we could get up another Ball!"

The wheel of the year dipped into winter—stood—and then began once more to turn. The older people cheered themselves with memories of the Black Christmas of the South African War, telling the despondent how everything had changed with the new year, so that by May the war had virtually been won. Those who could not remember, and some also who could, did not share their confidence. We were, they said, likely to lose this war by fighting it with the weapons of the last. Shrapnel no doubt had been effective against the Boers, but we wanted something more deadly for the Germans. And we were short of everything—shells and guns and men. . . . Some even murmured against Lord Kitchener. We needed, they said, a younger man, whose mind did not run in the groove of his own illustrious past, who did not see the best equipped and longest prepared army of all times in terms of desert warfare. . . . There were not many of such critics in Marlingate and those there were had a rough time at the hands of Mrs. Landless and Georgie; Sibylla, though as deeply convinced, was more vulnerable in argument, being, as usual, too much on the defensive, and unsure of her facts.

She often felt moved to a sadness outside herself by those events taking place across the grey and lonely sea that sighed against Marlin-

gate's winter beaches. She did not remember giving more than a passing thought to the sufferings of the troops in South Africa. Indeed she had scarcely pictured any sufferings at all. The dozen heroes whom the town had sent forth had all returned safely, if more obscurely than they left it. But now it was already known that many who had gone would not come back. There were mourners in Fish Street and High Street, in Bozzum Square and Zuriel Place; and if the hand of death had not yet touched Monypenny Crescent or Becket Grove it was because the New Town had had fewer young men to give to danger.

But one or two who used to live there in the past had now gone farther from it still. Early in February Sibylla heard that Philip Janaway had been killed near Ypres. She had not seen him since the family left the town in 1905, and she had not spoken to him for some years before that, but his death gave her a dreary private sense of importance. She might have loved him, she might have married him if . . . She never heard what had become of Roker, for the Kings no longer lived in Marlingate.

It was consoling to take these thoughts away from the sea and bring them into the warmth and peace of St. Nicholas' Church, where an intercession service was held every day at twelve o'clock. Here she would kneel, laying both the sorrow outside herself and the sorrow within at the feet of that strong loving-kindness symbolized for her in the hanging ruby of the altar lamp and in the spare, upright, cassocked figure that kneeled in front of it.

One morning he asked her if she would help organize a rota of watchers in the Lady Chapel for a special day's pleading, and in mingled fear and joy she had agreed. It was wonderful to be asked by him for any help, and he had given her a task in which her mind especially delighted; but at the same time she felt a reluctance—a dread—as if she had been asked to hold the chalice. . . . Hitherto she had kept apart from the church's many activities. There were bands of women who cleaned the altar brasses, washed the surplices, changed the hangings of the sanctuary. But she had never even wished to join them, preferring to gaze reverently on these things from afar, nor, as their numbers had always been in excess of their labours, had she ever been asked to do so. She knew many of them well enough for a nod or an occasional word, but she had attempted no friendships among them, partly for the reason that had kept her aloof from their work, partly from a fear of her mother's reactions, with the consequent social

difficulties. The church was in fact her heaven, in which Mr. Hardcastle was god and his workers angels, and Sibylla had enough instinctive wisdom to realize, though perhaps unconsciously, that any closer contacts might shatter this conception and remove much of the peace and freedom it had brought into her life.

She therefore approached her new task with the utmost diffidence, a diffidence which was largely responsible for her success. The parish workers at St. Nicholas' were a jealous gang, and inclined to resent ecclesiastical favours bestowed on others. But Sibylla had attended the church long enough to be a familiar figure, and she had never attempted to secure to herself the smallest privilege in the sacristy. When, therefore, she made her timid approaches, evidently awe-inspired by their superior position and effacing herself completely in her requests, they responded gracefully enough, and her list of intercessors was easily made to cover the clock.

One of them indeed approved of her so highly that she asked her to tea at her house in Rye Lane. But this was a doubtful pleasure, for she talked the whole time about Father Hardcastle—not as a priest, which might have been edifying if alarming, but as a man. He came, apparently, from Gloucestershire, and she used to know his mother. He had been to Haileybury and Cambridge and had studied law for a while, then changed his mind and taken Orders. He was very fond of his sister and her children, and liked to spend his summer holidays with them in Wales, where he went in a lot for golf and fishing. His health used not to be very good and he had had an operation for gall-stones, but he was perfectly well now—had been well ever since he came to Marlingate; though he smoked too much—he acknowledged it himself. He was interested in old furniture and had some nice pieces at the Rectory, where he had recently installed a new bathroom.

Under the weight of this earthly knowledge Sibylla felt depressed for many days to come.

But a heavier load was shortly to fall upon her. One day at lunch, Georgie, who had spent the morning on the golf-course, said:

"Mother, I thought that, if you don't mind, I might ask Mr. Hardcastle here to lunch next Wednesday. We're getting up a little tournament, and this house is so much nearer the course than the Rectory."

"Certainly, my dear, if he doesn't mind a family luncheon. We don't profess to give lunch-parties in war-time."

"No, Mother, of course not; whatever it's like it can't be worse than he'd get at the club-house."

Sibylla had put down her knife and fork. The colour had rushed into her cheeks.

"Oh," she said, "but I don't think he'd come."

"Why not?" her mother and sister both asked in some surprise.

"He doesn't—I meant he isn't that sort of clergyman. He's a priest and he doesn't go out to teas and lunches like Mr. Blake."

"My dear Sibylla," said Georgie, "what an extraordinary thing to say; and it's quite untrue. He had lunch with the Parkinsons only last Monday, and I know that he's been to tea more than once with old Miss Parlour. He's not always rushing round like Mr. Blake, but it would be very odd if he never went anywhere."

"Very odd indeed," said her mother, "and Sibylla evidently knows nothing about him."

"I—I," faltered Sibylla, "I—I've met him only in church, but I've always understood . . . I mean he'll think it very queer."

"I'm sure he won't think it queer at all," said Georgie. "I've met him quite often—not in church—and evidently I know him better than you do."

"Perhaps you may—outside. But it's not that—he isn't what you think . . ." She broke off, not knowing how to go on.

"Really, Sibylla," said her mother, "you're making yourself rather ridiculous."

Sibylla knew that she was, but she was too deeply disturbed to hold her tongue.

"Besides," she persisted, "he always has an intercession service at twelve."

"I know," said Georgie; "but on Wednesday he'll have to get somebody else to take it."

"I don't suppose he'll want to go in for the tournament."

"He entered his name for it yesterday afternoon."

"Why—why did you never tell me you knew him so well?"

"Really, Sibylla!" broke in Mrs. Landless.

"I don't know him well," said Georgie, "but I've been round with him once or twice, and it seemed only hospitable to ask him to lunch on the tournament day as we live so much nearer the course than he

does. I can't understand why you're making such a fuss. Do you think he'll think Father ought to have called on him all those years ago, or that Mother ought to have called since?"

"It would have been an unheard-of thing for me to call on him," said Mrs. Landless.

"I—I wasn't thinking of calls," choked Sibylla.

"Then what were you thinking of?"

Sibylla could not tell her. The matter was far beyond any comprehension but her own, and even that only imperfectly grasped it. All she knew for certain was that it would be almost unendurable if Father Hardcastle came to lunch, sat in her mother's drawing-room and at her mother's table, ate and talked like an ordinary human being. For a while she felt sure that he would not come, he would be shocked at such a worldly and ignorant invitation, but the comfort of this conviction was soon destroyed. He had accepted—and apparently, if Georgie was to be believed, accepted with alacrity.

The intervening days were full of apprehension. Sometimes Sibylla scarcely knew what she dreaded. Was it that her mother would provide a too bountiful and luxurious occasion, which would distress him with its worldliness? Or was her fear just another of Cook's clumsy, unimaginative meals, unworthy of such an eater? Or had the situation really nothing to do with eating and drinking but with altogether more significant clashes between heaven and earth?

When it finally materialized the prevailing atmosphere, for Sibylla, was one of bathos. Father Hardcastle came and behaved just like an ordinary visitor, except that he said grace instead of her mother. He talked about the war, about the tournament, about that new book about the Kaiser which everybody was reading. He obviously enjoyed his lunch and accepted a second helping of both the roast mutton and the rhubarb pie. It was not till the meal was nearly over that he mentioned St. Nicholas' Church, and that, she felt, was out of special consideration for herself. Finding her so silent on other topics he had said:

"Your daughter's been giving me some valuable help lately, Mrs. Landless. She organized our special Day of Prayer last week."

"That's very interesting, Mr. Hardcastle. Sibylla never tells us what she does at church, but I'm glad to know she's making herself useful."

Sibylla turned crimson at the injustice of this reproach, but as she

opened her mouth to defend herself Father Hardcastle's reply came cutting across her own.

"Yes, indeed she is. I expect to have more work for her presently," and his smile suddenly transported him back into his old heaven.

After that she was happier and at ease again. She felt sure that he had spoken deliberately to save her lips from sin and folly. As an angel he had intervened, and now she could sit, though still in silence, and listen to Georgie and her mother chattering of sport and war and people, and calling him "Mr." Hardcastle, as if he were an ordinary man.

#### IV

MARYA'S new novel appeared in the autumn of 1915. Until the day of publication her feelings had been governed by relief that she had managed to finish the book, but now a new kind of emotion supervened. She became acutely anxious as to its fate, for on its fate her own depended. Her publishers, a comparatively new firm to whom she had been attracted by the brilliance of their list and the daring of their advertising, had shown themselves disappointingly cautious in the matter of payment. In spite of the success of her first book they would give her no more than the hundred pounds advance and ten per cent. royalty stipulated by the contract made before the publication of its predecessor.

This she knew was strictly legal and fundamentally just, but she had hoped that *Palace People* might have procured her better treatment. It had sold very little since the war, but up till then had earned her some fifteen hundred pounds. She had hoped that Lovell and Snagge might have been moved by this to increase both her advance and her royalties. But they were evidently not taking any risks. Her initial success might have been no more than a spark, and anyway there was the war to make everything uncertain. The public was no longer interested in serious novels. It liked either war books such as *The First Hundred Thousand* or undisguised, unblushing sentiment. There were also the war poets, Rupert Brooke, Robert Nichols, Siegfried Sassoon, to supply the needs of the serious-minded. The publishers told her frankly that they did not expect large sales for *Lost in Arden*, and though their reasons were all circumstantial and of the times, she suspected that they thought it an inferior book.

She herself, in her secret heart, thought the same, though she was so intensely weary of her work that she could not feel certain. It was not till the critics proclaimed its inferiority by faint praise, small space or total exclusion, that she believed in the sentence her judgment had already passed.

Even then there was some hope from the public, which pursues its fancies regardless of merit or the arbitrators thereof. But the public mind was busy with all the shifts and set-backs of a second year of war. It was uninterested in a society which it had been told was gone for ever, with all the bad old ways that had existed before the redemption of 1914. It no longer wanted to read of young women drinking and daring or of idealistic young men who were not in khaki. Either, as the publisher had foretold, it read about the war or wallowed with the Pollyannas imported from America. *Lost in Arden* fell dead at the end of three months.

In a swagger of defiance, Myra determined to give it a handsome funeral. She had come up to London for its publication, but after a few days of renewing or attempting to renew literary contracts, she had returned to Winter Land, meaning vaguely to start another novel. When in six months the publishers told her that they proposed to remainder the book she came up again, inviting herself to stay with Kitty, who had a small service flat in Ebury Street.

"Kitty, do you mind if I give a party in your flat?"

"Not a bit, as long as you ask me to it."

Myra was on more easy, sisterly terms with Kitty than with either Georgie or Sibylla. The ten years between them seemed to have shrunk as they both grew older, and they felt almost as contemporaries, though they did not meet very often. Kitty worked at a canteen near Victoria station, taking the children for their holidays either to Marlingate or to stay with her husband's relations. Hugh was still in France, alive and unwounded, returning for rare, irregular leaves. In those days of holocaust, when the newspapers were dark with casualty lists and every moment threatened the news of death, Myra felt intensely sorry for her sister. But Kitty carried herself well in anxiety, not asking for compassion, working hard and going about among her many friends. Her only sign of stress was that she hardly ever mentioned Hugh.

"Of course I shall ask you to my party," said Myra. "I particularly

want you to come, as I probably shan't be giving another for a very long time—if ever."

"Oh, don't say that."

"I do. This is to be a farewell party."

Kitty looked startled.

"Farewell to whom?—to what?"

"To me—or to novel-writing, whichever way you like to look at it. I'm going to ask all my literary friends for one last shout to celebrate my giving up writing. This is to be a Last Novel Party."

"Myra, don't be silly."

"Well, people give parties to celebrate a first novel, so why not to celebrate a last one? The reason is, I suppose, that no one ever knows it is the last. This time I declare it on my solemn oath."

"But I don't understand you. Are you really determined to give up writing? Why?"

"For the best of all reasons. Because I can't write."

Kitty grew impatient. She was not herself of a literary turn of mind, and the mere fact of having written a book seemed to establish its author in an unassailable position. Besides, she had for years been witnessing the results of Myra's first achievement.

"How can you say that? Think of the success you had with *Palace People*."

"I am thinking of it, and also of the failure I've had with *Lost in Arden*. I was able, by a stroke of luck, to write one successful book, but I see now that I haven't got it in me to write another. Do you remember my telling you about Ivy Betersden?"

Kitty looked blank.

"Oh, it was years ago, when I was a small kid. I used to have a sort of dream-child called Ivy Betersden, whom I made up stories about and bored my friends with till you told me to stop and Toby Street called me a liar. I'm sorry you've forgotten her."

"I don't think you told me much."

"No—it was mostly inflicted on Rose. You remember Rose Lusted who used to be our housemaid and whose people live at Winter Land? Well, when she was sacked I had no one to listen to my stories about Ivy, so I bottled them up inside until they fermented and came out in a novel called *Palace People*. It was popular because, I imagine, all dream-children are very much the same and people like meeting and recognizing their own in a book."

"Well, haven't you any more dream-children to write about?"

"No, my dear; that's the trouble. I've grown up, and evidently my literary talent was nothing but a childish hangover. When I tried to write a grown-up book about things and people I'd observed from outside—I failed; and I deserved to fail. Now I can't write anything at all. I tried all last month and couldn't get even an idea to start from."

"I must say you're very detached and cynical about it all."

"That's another reason why I know I can't write. Not that I'm really detached and cynical; I mind very much indeed, but chiefly, I'm afraid, because I want the money. I've been living my own life for the last three years and I can't face the thought of having to go back and live with Mother."

Kitty looked sympathetic.

"My dear, I know. I simply couldn't endure it myself, so I can feel for you. But surely you won't be obliged to do that. Are you completely broke?"

"Yes, completely; for I've been living on my capital for the last three years, thinking that it was my income. Of course I could get a few hundred pounds by selling Winter Land Cottage, but that wouldn't really help me much, because it would only be putting off the evil day and I should be losing a place where I can live very cheaply."

"Can't you come up to London and get a war job?"

"They're most of them unpaid—unless one has special qualifications, which I haven't. I had thought of trying to get into the Censor's office, but I don't know enough languages."

Kitty was silent a moment, staring at the toe of her pretty buckled shoe; then suddenly she looked up and asked:

"Why don't you get married?"

Myra laughed.

"Just to escape having to live at home?—it would be taking rather a risk, wouldn't it?"

"I don't mean that. But isn't there anyone about whom you could fall in love with? You must meet plenty of men."

"I don't know that I do—not the marrying sort. You see, I'm in an awkward position. My books have scared away the ordinary, marrying man and introduced me to the kind who doesn't bother much about marriage." She had deliberately ignored the faithful Toby, knowing pretty well what Kitty's reaction would be. "Perhaps now I'm

giving up writing, I shall have some better chances," she added with a smile.

"By the way," said Kitty, "there's a man whom I'd like to ask to your party—you must know him already, I should think, for he used to live somewhere not very far from you in the country. Young Lawrie Buckrose—you must have met him."

"I have—years ago, when we used to go to children's parties together. But I haven't seen him for ages. You think he'd make me a good husband?"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of husbands," said Kitty with a look that clearly implied that she was—"only of a very nice guest for your party. I met him a few weeks ago at Lady Crowther's, and the other night he took me to see *The Passing Show*. He's rather a knut and in the Gunners—stationed at the Tower for the moment, which is very convenient. I'll see if I can get hold of him."

"Oh, do," said Myra; "but I don't promise to marry him—even to escape having to live with Mother."

The success of the party was as mixed as its nature. When it was over, Myra still acknowledged that she could not have given it in Kitty's flat without inviting her, but she wished now that she had not encouraged her to ask so many of her friends. Kitty's friends were all, either traditionally or experimentally, in the Army, whereas the majority of Myra's were not; and even in peace-time the military and civilian atmospheres do not easily blend. Kitty's soldiers stood apart glaring at Myra's authors, and what was worse their wives glared too and more intensely. That was the winter when the collapse of the voluntary recruiting system was being staved off by a nation-wide movement of moral compulsion. The hoardings flamed with posters proclaiming impressively "Your King and Country Need You" or enquiring familiarly "Is your Best Boy in Khaki?" Women were distributing white feathers among those who had failed to respond to higher appeals, and even among those who had responded but were wearing mufti on leave. The officers' wives looked as if they would willingly have plucked the feathers out of their hats had they only been white.

The only one of Kitty's guests who seemed ready to fraternize with Myra's was Lawrie Buckrose, who though in khaki was obviously more interested in the literary than in the military side of the after-

noon. Myra had not seen him since his father's death, some five or six years ago, when the family had left Bewbush Manor, and even in those earlier days had met him very seldom, for the Streets did not mix in what was still called the County at Ellenwhorne. She would scarcely have recognized in this attractive, self-assured young man, whose thick red hair had been brushed and oiled into the sleekness of mahogany, the shock-headed schoolboy who had unwillingly danced with her on the only occasion she had gone to a party at the Manor, or the silent, superior undergraduate with whom she had once fox-trotted when she "came out" among the dwindling splendours of the Marlingate Christmas Ball. Enough of the latter remained to have earned Kitty's commendation of him as a knut—an indefinable, lazy smartness, as different from the military correctness of the officers as from the equally studied casualness of the authors—but he was now definitely someone she did not know and a very great improvement on the man she had known.

He must have felt much the same about her.

"I should never have known you," he said, while his eyes admired.

"Well, it's a long time since we met and we didn't meet often."

"It isn't only that." Then he added: "It's very, very kind of you to let me come to your party. I know it's yours really, and not your sister's."

"The original idea was mine, but the actual party seems to be just as much Kitty's."

He looked slyly at the officers swarming round the tea-table.

"I prefer the lions to the Christians."

"I'm afraid I haven't got any real lions. Most of the people here aren't particularly famous."

"But *you* are a real lion, aren't you?"

She shook her head, then felt moved to challenge him.

"I don't believe you've read anything I've written."

"No," he answered tranquilly, "but I've heard about it."

"Heard enough to make you determined not to read."

He smiled.

"I don't read many novels and my tastes are peculiar."

"What sort of novels do you read?"

"Well, I'm a great, though starved, admirer of Viola Meynell."

Then I certainly wouldn't do for him, thought Myra—not that it matters now. Aloud she asked:

"What do you think of the war poets?"

"Give me Sassoon, but not the others."

"Not Rupert Brooke?"

"Certainly not Rupert Brooke."

"Have you been in France yet?"

"No, I haven't; but when I go I'm sure I shall find Sassoon the least misleading interpreter of what I'll find there."

"I have Robert Nichols here this afternoon. Would you like to meet him?"

"I should very much like to meet him; but I shall tell him how very much less I like his Ardours than his Endurances."

"Come along, then." She led him across the room towards one of the few authors in khaki. "You're the first to cross the line. Now I shall try my hand at shaking a Martini cocktail and see if that doesn't shake up the party too a little."

On the whole Myra felt flattered by Kitty's idea of a suitable husband for her: a man who combined a good intelligence with good manners and a good income was something superior to what she would have dared hope for herself. But she did not expect the idea to materialize. Though she had found him attractive, she doubted if he had done more than find her improved. After those first brief exchanges, he had not sought her out again at the party. She was therefore surprised when he called on her a couple of days later. It was her last day in town and he had nearly missed her. She told him so.

"Are you going back to your cottage at Winter Land?" he asked; and when she told him that she was he sighed and said: "You're lucky. I wish I could go down there too."

"You will be going back some day, won't you? I mean, you haven't got rid of Bewbush Manor for good?"

"No; the hospital comes to an end with the war. But I shall probably have to let it for a while afterwards. I can't afford to live there yet."

She had been wrong, therefore, in giving him a good income.

"Is it a large estate?"

"No, but very much encumbered, as they say in books. My father left things in a dreadful mess. The house wants thousands spending on it, too."

"It's a beautiful place."

"Do you ever go there?" he asked almost enviously.

"Only once a week to make swabs. I don't see much of it."

"I should like to show it to you. I don't get down there often, but I have to go from time to time to see my bailiff. If you're in those parts when I am, perhaps you would let me take you round."

"I should love it," she said, surprised.

"Of course it's all looking very seedy now, even worse than it did when my father was alive. We have only the old gardener left—all the money there is has to go on the farms."

"How many farms have you?"

"Only four besides the home place—Crowlink, Lordaine, Hane-holt's and Pyramus. It isn't a large estate, but sometimes I think I ought to sell half of it in order to pay for the other half. The trouble is that I can't make up my mind to do it or which farm to sell—there isn't one I feel I can live without."

She realized that he had come to talk to her about the country. His literary mood had been discarded, and if she interested him now it was because she lived near his old home and not because she had written books. Her knowledge of the neighbourhood was very much more restricted than his, as she was neither a car-owner nor a walker and had kept chiefly within the small spaces of Winter Land and Ellenwhorne. But inside those limits her knowledge was loving and complete. She was able to charm him with field names, she had followed all the little streams in the woods, she had intimate news of cottages. As for his wider world, at least she knew enough of it to be able to ask him intelligent questions.

She had not expected to find in him so deep a love of the country round Copstreet and Marlpott. She had thought that only she herself loved it like that—and that only because it stood for freedom and escape, first in a dream, then in actuality. For him the symbol was reversed, and the fields were home, enclosure, return. He had been born at Bewbush, had played there as a child—a child more petted, less dominated than she had ever been; later on it had become "home for the holidays," offering peaceful and congenial work and play after the molestations and incompatibilities of school. As a young man he had returned there for the sport he loved—duck-shooting on the Tillingham marshes, when the dawn lay stretched like a white cloth behind the meadow-hills of Barline and the overflow of the river was another sky . . . his gun lifted in the red woods against the red birds in their

flight . . . his horse under him crashing through the spinneys as the little hunt cried its way from Doucegrove to Brede Eye.

Myra had never ridden a horse or held a gun; in fact she had all a townswoman's attitude towards sport, and she felt a townswoman as she listened to Lawrie Buckrose. But her friendship with the Streets had given her some knowledge of farming and she was able to meet him on that subject with at least the appearance of equality. She soon found that it was his main interest—that the sport was but the garnish of a country gentleman's life and the life itself was the farms, his main anxiety in war-time being that, in spite of his absence, his little estate should thrive and improve itself.

"Your friend Joe Street does pretty well with his place, doesn't he?" he asked almost wistfully.

"Yes, he has up till now; but it looks as if he was bound to have labour difficulties if the war goes on."

"Has he still got all his boys at home to help him? That's the only economic form of farming—a family of slaves."

"I doubt if any of them would recognize themselves as slaves. They're all as keen on the farm as he is, though Toby's in the army now."

"Toby?—he's the slow, righteous one, isn't he?"

For a reason which had nothing to do with any change in her feelings towards him, Myra resented this description of Toby Street.

"He's slow—they're all slow, for they're real countrymen. But I'd never call him righteous. Anyhow, I'm not quite sure what it means."

"It means someone who sets up to be better than his company."

"Then Toby certainly isn't that."

He seemed challenged by her defence.

"It depends on the company. You probably haven't seen him in the same company as I have."

"I didn't know you'd ever seen him much."

"Oh, I dare say not much, but one's bound to meet a man occasionally when one lives in the same neighbourhood."

"And you think you can tell what sort of man he is from an occasional meeting?"

"There again, it depends—on the circumstances."

He was evidently determined not to tell her what those circumstances were, and Myra did not press him—partly because she did not want to display a greater interest in Toby than she felt and partly

because she could well imagine that there were occasions on which he might appear self-righteous to a man of slighter integrity. She had been surprised to find how much his idealism had stood up against the actualities of war. He still kept some of the simple fervour with which he had first gone out to fight; and here with her now was a man who had not yet fought and yet had already lost his fervour—if he had ever had any.

What was there in her that made her feel so much more attracted to him than to Toby? . . . For she felt clearly attracted now, though it seemed trite and unenterprising to fall in love with a man so carefully chosen for her by fate as well as by her sister. Nothing could be more obviously suitable than for her to marry Lawrie Buckrose and live with him in the country they both loved, while still occasionally mixing with that livelier society in which they both took an intelligent interest. He would, she felt, be inclined to marry out of, rather than back into, the stereotyped world of the county in which he had been reared. As for her, the two sorts of men, the two sorts of lives that attracted her, would be satisfactorily merged in him. If she married Toby Street, she would have the country alone, without mental stimulation—it would be like living without wine; if she married one of her literary friends, she married the town with all its vanities and lived without bread. But Lawrie was both bread and wine. . . .

Her thoughts had taken their usual homeward flight towards herself, and had so preoccupied her as to make her appear absent-minded. He said:

“What are you thinking of?”

“Oh, nothing . . .” Then, realizing that he might think that “nothing” was Toby Street, she added: “I was only considering how best one mixed the ingredients of town and country in one’s life,” blushing at such a sketch of truth.

“Some people—most people—don’t mix them at all. The large majority of English people live in the town and the country is only another word for the holidays; while to most country people the town is just shopping or possibly a binge.”

“I must be exceptional, then, in feeling I need both. And, if I’m not mistaken, you’re the same.”

“No doubt we’re both survivals of those grand days when ordinary well-to-do people lived in the country, but had their town houses where they spent the worst winter months. But at the moment the

town has lost its attractions for me. All I think about is getting into the country as often as I can; and when the war's over—if I'm alive—I shall probably never come out of it. By the way, you won't forget your promise to let me show you Bewbush?"

"No, I certainly won't forget. Let me know when you're coming down."

"I will; and now I must go back to my prison in the Tower. I'm on orderly duty to-night, or I'd ask you to come out and have dinner with me somewhere."

They shook hands politely, but already there was something incongruous about it.

In the high fields round Winter Land and Ellenwhorne it was possible to hear the guns in France. They stole upon the air in a soft mutter, less like a sound than the ghost of a sound. To Myra's ears they were sinister, the pulse of death; and she almost resented young Harry Lusted's greeting as she passed him in the Pondtail meadow: "Fine marnun. They säound busy over there." "You'll soon be out there yourself," she thought. "They'll sound different then."

Already the young men were going from the fields, the young men who had been slow at first—for when you sow you feel bound to wait for reaping, and when you have reaped you must wait till the grain is threshed, and by threshing-time the field is sown again. Now the more enterprising spirits among them had yielded to the country's pressure and joined the Army, leaving the dullards and the slow-coaches to work the farms. The farmers grumbled, and said it would be better to have conscription right away and exempt the really essential workers; but farmers' grumbles were, with Wigan and mothers-in-law, no more than a familiar ingredient of the country's comic stockpot, and could not be taken seriously among all the fine seriousness that was arming the people.

That distant throb on the air was the sound of Germany's spring offensive—the thunder of her armies against Ypres and Bethune and Verdun, now advanced many weeks and a few yards on that five hundred-mile front of scarred and broken earth. Looking round her at the fields in their richness of buttercups and sorrel, with the trees already heavy-leaved and the hedges shaking the last of their hawthorn into the meadow verges, Myra could see a ghostly palimpsest of gashed and barrel soil, ruined farms, shattered trees—in all those hundreds of miles not one green, spreading tree. . . . Toby had de-

scribed that land to her, and she seemed to see it between her and the fields as she walked over them for this last meeting on this last day of his leave.

When she came back from London she had found him just arrived at Ellenwhorne, and they had seen a good deal of each other during his ten days at home, meeting in a curious mixed atmosphere of friendship and courtship, the first predominating. He had not renewed his proposal, and only his letters had maintained it. On his first leave, with her feelings heightened and romanticized by the atmosphere of war, she had been disappointed as well as relieved to find that he was claiming no new territory. His letters had been almost love-letters, but his behaviour was strictly that of a friend. Indeed, she had at one time thought him almost afraid of the situation he had himself created. Then he had gone away and the letters had begun again, but with an added fervour, as if he had found a greater warmth and encouragement in their contacts than she had been aware of. After that she knew what to expect—a friend on leave, a lover in the post. Since his going out to France his letters had acquired a depth and maturity that had been lacking before, but in this also he was changed at home, becoming there the simple, uncritical boy he used to be.

On this especial leave she had been glad to find the situation stabilized. Her experiences in London had disinclined her for both the lover and the patriot. She now felt practically sure that she could never marry him, but would rather tell him so by letter than by word of mouth, and she was thankful not to have to oppose his sincere and deeply practised love of his country with the disillusion that had invaded her own heart. He would have hated and despised her attitude to the war—even with his personal experience of the effects of greed and incompetence in high places he would have resented her criticisms, especially of the Great Man drowned in the Orkneys, the victorious symbol to which perhaps even victory had been sacrificed. She was thankful not to have to talk to him about either the shortage of munitions or the death of Kitchener. They talked very little about the war, very little about themselves, filling these hours of respite with the piecemeal treasure of each minute as it passed in the fields or on the farm.

Before he went, however, she must tell him something which she feared would disquiet him. She had found a temporary solution to her own personal problems which she knew he would not like. She

had, at Kitty's suggestion, applied for a job at the War Office; it was not highly paid, for she was not highly skilled, and being ignorant of shorthand and typewriting could expect nothing better than a temporary clerkship with the chance of becoming, perhaps, the overseer of some small department. Certainly it was a position that would bring her neither wealth nor glory and could be announced to her friends only as the choice of despair. But it would enable her to stave off, at least till the end of the war, the final misery of a return to home-life in Monypenny Crescent. Her salary, in conjunction with what she still had left of the money earned by *Lost in Arden*, would be enough to keep her at least in independence, and a certain degree of comfort might be added if she succeeded in letting Winter Land Cottage, which was what she knew Toby would dislike most of all.

Partly for this reason she had chosen to make the announcement in public, when the family was assembled at what the Streets frankly called dinner. Mrs. Street sat at one end of the table carving the silverside of beef, and opposite her at the other end was the empty chair that awaited her husband's return from the fields. Arthur and Eric had already come in and were sitting opposite. Toby and Lilian, whose husband was out in Gallipoli (Dora had married a sailor and lived in Portsmouth). As she watched them there, eating, chatting, laughing, and teasing their mother about the suet dumplings, which for some kitchen reason were not enough to go round, Myra wondered if, had her home been like the Streets', she would have made such a fight for independence, been so willing to endure so much in order to do no more than save herself from having to go back there.

Mr. Street's arrival only added to the general comfort and conversation, and it was some time before she could find a silence long enough for what she had to say. When she had said it, however, there was silence enough, though she could not tell if it was caused by her own words or by Toby's face. His mother was the first to speak.

"Oh, Myra dear, how dreadfully we shall miss you!"

Myra could never be sure how much Mrs. Street knew about her and Toby—a good deal, she imagined, though equally probably he had told her nothing.

"I shall miss you too," she said in a flat voice.

"But you're not giving up Winter Land Cottage, are you?" asked Joe Street.

"I shan't sell it, but I shall have to let it—I shall need the rent. My

salary is only two pounds a week and I'm afraid I'm not practical or self-denying enough to live in London on as little as that."

"Well, I think it's very good and patriotic of you," said Mrs. Street. "I wish I could do more war-work, but really I haven't a minute to spare outside this place."

Myra felt ashamed.

"I'm afraid my motives are really rather selfish. I can't make any more money out of writing books, so I've either got to earn it some other way or go and live at home."

"You may call that selfish, but whatever you call it you'll be helping your country and working hard for very little pay."

"I doubt if there's very much 'helping' done in any branch of the Civil Service, which is after all what I'm going in for, though I'm called a War Office clerk. I believe that a lot of the 'work' consists in waiting for something to do; and as for the pay, it's probably about twice as much as either I or the work are worth."

"You sound bitter," said Lilian.

"I am bitter," said Myra lightly, looking at Toby's face. "You must remember that I've failed as an author."

"Oh, no, you mustn't say that," said Mrs. Street; "it's only the war that has set you back, as it's set back so many things. You'll be doing as well as ever after it. Personally I liked your last book even better than the first one. And remember this, Myra dear, you can always come here for week-ends, just as often as you'd go to Winter Land Cottage if it wasn't let. We can't allow you to leave us altogether."

Arthur and Eric and Lilian asked her questions about her work and where she proposed to live, but Toby did not say a word.

She knew, however, that he would have plenty to say as soon as they were alone together. After dinner they all went out to visit the cow-lodge and look at a new-born heifer calf; then the family separated—Mrs. Street to grade and pack eggs for tomorrow's market, her husband to see to the hoeing of his roots. Arthur to poultice a sick horse and Eric to supervise the hop-tying, while Lilian made her only concession to pregnancy by lying down for half an hour. Toby and Myra were left to themselves. He said:

"Let's go and sit in the garden."

The garden was the only untended part of Ellenwhorne. No one

had time to give it more than an occasional mowing or weeding, and in early summer, with all the family and farmhands so busy in the fields, it wore a look of almost riotous neglect. Toby led Myra to an uncertain seat in a green, decrepit arbour, over which a hop-bine trailed to meet and smother a rose. In front of them, beyond the shaggy lawn and tangled clumps of snapdragon, some straggling lilac-bushes framed a picture of the Tillingham marshes, all golden now with buttercups. In the heart of the picture was a little red farm, the white cowls of the oats just visible in the thick afternoon sunshine. Without thinking, Myra exclaimed:

“Isn’t it lovely! I’d no idea there was such a lovely view from here.”  
He looked at her sadly.

“And you’re going to live in London.”

“I’m afraid you don’t think much of my scheme.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. I don’t like to think of you in London—with the Zeppelins coming over. When I’m out there I like to think you’re safe—safe here.”

“But, Toby, I can’t be here. I’ve explained it all—I can’t afford to keep up Winter Land Cottage now that I’m not making any money out of my books. It’s a case either of my living in London or living in Marlingate, and of the two I prefer London, in spite of the Zeppelins, because there at least I keep my independence.”

“There’s still another choice open to you.”

It was so long since he had spoken of marriage that she was taken off her guard. She asked, “What is it?” then knew at once. “Oh, Toby, I can’t—I’m sorry, but if you mean what you meant at the beginning of the war, I’m afraid I still can’t.”

“Oh, Myra . . .”

She felt that she ought to say more—tell him straightly and firmly that she was now positive that she could never marry him, that he must go and find someone else, never think of her again except as a friend. But she had not the strength or the ruthlessness to enlighten him in such a way.”

“I wanted to speak to you about it,” he continued, “even if you hadn’t been going to take this job. I wanted to tell you that I see now that it wasn’t sensible of me to say that we couldn’t be married till the end of the war. Lord knows when that will be and I’ve no right to ask you to wait for it. If you’ll have me, we’ll be married on my very next leave, and then with my pay and allowances you’ll be

able to go on living at Winter Land—it'll be our home, for me to come back to. I don't suppose I'll have any more leave till the autumn, as things are getting rather hot out there; but if you can't afford to live in the cottage till then and really can't bear to go home just for the summer, I'm sure Mother would love to have you at Ellenwhorne."

He had evidently thought it all out very carefully, all excepting the possibility of his not living to see another leave. Or, and more likely, he had thought of that too, but being himself chose to say nothing about it. It was because that thought was at the very door of her heart, shutting away all others, that Myra could not say what she wanted. The silence was filled by the distant mutter of the guns in France.

"Myra, I'm not very good at saying these things. Somehow I find it easier to write them, though I'm not a literary chap. I suppose it's because when I don't see you I don't feel so frightened . . ."

"Frightened!"

"Frightened of how much I love you."

She was astonished and disturbed. She must not let him care for her like this. She had imagined his love to be as calm as his kiss, yet here it was, by the testimony of his own unpractised lips, frightening him. . . .

"Don't love me, Toby. I don't deserve it, and I'm not the right sort of person for you."

"I know exactly the sort of person you are."

"You don't—you can't, or you wouldn't love me."

"Darling, I've known you since you were eight or nine. We've spent all our summers together since then, and for six months before the war we were seeing each other almost every day. You're like one of the family. Don't tell me I don't know you."

"That's just it—" She broke off into another silence, and again that hurrying heart beat over them in the south wind. "Seeing a lot of a person isn't necessarily knowing them, Toby dear. And I assure you I'm not really the sort of woman who could make you happy—I'm too different from you, for one thing."

"It would be very dull if we were both the same. It's the differences that I like—your quick ways, the clever things you say; and we both like doing the same things, we both want always to live in the country. I'm sure, quite sure, we could be happy together."

In a moment of irritation at what seemed his masculine denseness she achieved the strength to speak plainly.

"No doubt we could, Toby dear, if I really loved you in the same way as you love me. But quite honestly I don't. I like you—I'm fond of you—but it's as an old friend, not as a lover or a husband."

"Don't you think that may come some day?"

She shook her head.

"It's no good, Toby. I'm quite sure that I shall never change—never feel for you what you feel for me."

There was silence and the guns seemed to come nearer. After a while, when she could bear it no longer, she said:

"I don't want you to waste your heart on me, as you're doing now. I hate having to say such a thing, especially at this moment. . . . But I do want you to find someone else who'll really make you happy—who'll feel for you what you feel for her, because I could never feel anything like that."

"Not like what I feel for you," he said in a dull voice, rather like a child repeating a lesson it does not understand.

"No. I'm sure now that that's impossible. But, Toby dear, you know I'm not sending you away—not saying good-bye for ever or that sort of thing . . . you yourself have said that I'm one of the family, so we simply must go on being friends. Nothing is changed in that way. I'm only asking you to think of me as you used to think, say, three years ago."

He wrinkled his forehead.

"I could never do that—I'm sure now that I shall never change. . . . But if you really feel as you say you do, I shan't bother you any more. . . . But may I still go on writing?"

"Yes, of course we'll still write to each other."

"But I shan't see you when I'm home on leave. You'll be in London."

"I dare say your mother would ask me down for a week-end."

"Should you come?"

"Why, of course."

He seemed pleased at that, but the next moment his face clouded.

"Myra, I want you to tell me just one thing—the reason you're going to live in London. Is it because there's someone there you—you feel about as you can't feel about me?"

She was glad that he had put the question in that way, because

she could answer him truthfully without telling him about Lawrie Buckrose.

"No, it isn't. I've told you, my dear, that I'm going there only because I've the chance of a salaried job. If I could earn my living down here as I used to do, I assure you that I shouldn't dream of going to London."

While she was speaking she realized that she was not being as truthful as she had thought. It was not really true that her decision to go and work at the War Office had been uninfluenced by the fact that Lawrie was in London and that she could hope to meet him there. He was stationed at the Tower—he might not be sent abroad for some time—they would perhaps be able to go about together quite a lot.

However, she would do nothing to correct the impression she had given. It seemed unnecessary to add the thought of a rival to the distresses of Toby's hour; and she felt, besides, a personal reluctance to put into words what had so far existed only in her thoughts. She did not at this moment want to talk or even to think about Lawrie Buckrose—he seemed out of place.

"I'll send you my address in London as soon as I've fixed on somewhere to stay. I've heard of some rather nice flats in St. John's Wood; but I'll go and stay with Kitty first, so that I can look round at my leisure."

"I hope you'll often come to Ellenwhorne for week-ends, whether I'm there or not. I want you to get out of London as much as possible."

"I'll get away from it whenever I can—you may depend on me for that," she said lightly. "And now, Toby dear, we haven't so very much longer before you'll have to think of going there yourself, so don't let's waste any more precious time talking about it. Let's talk about the things we usually talk about when we're together. Tell me about this view we're looking at. I don't remember having seen it before—the bushes must have been higher. What's that farm?—is it Loneham?"

"No," said Toby. "Loneham's farther east. That's Pyramus—one of the Bewbush Manor farms."

When Myra next saw Pyramus, she was right in the yard, gazing up into the old weather-beaten face of the dwelling-house, and Lawrie Buckrose stood beside her.

They had come down together from London, where she had been established several weeks before he was given forty-eight hours' leave with a sudden embarkation order for France. Up till then she had seen very little of him, less than she had expected. They had both been busy, or rather he had been busy, while her time had been fully occupied with the dilatory and complicated routine of her department. After a few weeks as an ordinary government clerk, weeks which had been filled by a quite extraordinary boredom, she had been made head of a small section whose duty it was to remove from each month's Army List the names of the dead. It had sounded a depressing job when offered, but was in operation no more depressing than any other form of stock-taking. The Deaths, as they were called, occupied a small glassed-in enclosure of the main Army List Department, and varied their cataloguing of the "killed in action" and "died on active service" with controversies with other departments as to identity and occasional correspondence with relatives who wrote to announce that the deceased had just walked into the house. There was so little emotion in the day's work that Myra sometimes found herself wondering if, should Toby's name appear on the casualty list, her first reaction would not be to send a memorandum to C.3.A.L.: "delete Capt. Thomas Bernard Street from 2nd Bn. Rl. Sx. Reg."

In spite of, perhaps because of, this emotional paralysis, she found the general effect of her work extraordinarily depressing, especially as her busiest times seemed always to be concentrated at week-ends, so that she was quite unable to escape to Winter Land, though the cottage was still unlet. She dared not ask for any special leave for fear that such a concession might imperil her visit to Bewbush with Lawrie. He spoke of it on each one of the few occasions they were able to meet—either dining quietly and congestedly in Soho, or in equal congestion but considerably less quiet sharing the discomforts of a Thé Dansant at the Elysée Palace. He depended on having her with him—he wanted more than anything else, he said, to show her the place and the farms—and it would never do if, when he had his leave, she had compromised hers by a private excursion.

When at last the day came it took her completely by surprise. She had not expected him to be given any leave till the end of the summer, when he thought he might be able to snatch a week before being sent down to Aldershot on a gunnery course. But suddenly, late one evening, he rang her up at her St. John's Wood flat and told her he

had been ordered to France in forty-eight hours. Would she come down with him to Sussex the next morning? He could show her the house, and the estate before he went on to a sister who lived near Angmering.

Without thinking how she could achieve her escape from the War Office she said "Yes, of course," and he arranged to come round and pick her up in a car a friend had lent him. He would bring food from Fortnum and Mason's and a bottle of Mouton Rothschild, and if she didn't mind going home alone by train they could have the whole morning and afternoon together "and give me at least one happy day to take over there with me."

Directly he had rung off she called up her chief and told him that she had to go out of town on urgent business the next morning. Then she went to bed, almost too happy to sleep.

When twelve hours later she sat beside Lawrie in the car, driving down to Sussex through the golden promise of a wartime harvest, she wondered why she should feel so happy when perhaps in a very few days the man who was making all her happiness might have gone not only from her side but from her life. She was not normally given to losing the future in a present lull, nor, she thought, had her tabulating and card-indexing of death so sterilized her that she was protected from its bitterness. No; her happiness must spring from the conviction that today would see her friendship with Lawrie definitely transformed into a love-affair—a conviction which in itself was worth a lot of happiness. Hitherto, at all their few meetings, he had given her hints which she had met with doubts—she knew that she had no real cause for doubt, but it would be a relief to have it made an impossibility. She had imagined (again with this reserve which she half-knew was based on the sands of a naturally anxious and foreboding temperament rather than on any solid rock of fact) that he was only waiting for his opportunity to declare himself; and now today the certainty of the opportunity seemed to bring with it the certainty of the declaration. To have his love for her sanctified by certainty would, for a time anyway, clear her mind of his uncertain death.

Her spirits soared as she pictured herself marrying him on his next leave, doing and being for him all that Toby had wanted her to do and be. . . . She stole a glance at his driving face, intent, oblivious of her at the moment as it watched the dusty clouds before

them on the road, clouds in which army lorries spun with furtive holiday-makers. No man, she thought, could look less like Toby Street. He had taken off his cap and the wind had ruffled his hair into impudent feathers, which sprang from a double crown, giving the back of his head a sort of little-boy roughness that made her heart feel lost and tender. Evidently, she thought to herself, this is my type, the sort of man I fall for, and the reason I've never fallen before is that this is the first time I've met him. How simple these things really are! Then she went on to think: it's a pity, though, that it's all so obvious. Even Mother will be pleased.

They drove first to the Manor House, through well-known approaches. She was already familiar with the main downstairs rooms. To show her what was private and beloved he had to take her out of the public orbit of the hospital into the room, now filled with stores, where he had slept as schoolboy and undergraduate, into the empty observation ward that used to be his nursery, and finally into the chain of attics that had been his indoor playground as a child.

"You can run the whole length of the roof and then get out on it at the end. My sisters and I used to have the most gorgeous times."

"How many sisters have you?—I forgot."

"I had three then—but Fiona, the eldest, died while I was at Oxford. Eleanor is married out in Burma, and I haven't seen her for years. Phyllis lives at Angmering and is married to a Papist. He's made her one."

"Do you mind?"

"Not really, as it doesn't seem to have turned her against her heathen brother. What I should mind would be if her boy Kenneth got Bewbush. I'm not interested in religion, but somehow I dislike the idea of a Papist having this place. The patronage of the living goes with it and a Papist can't hold that, so I must do my best to see that young Ken doesn't step into his uncle's shoes—which is another reason for marrying."

"Another . . ."

Her heart gave a sudden heavy beat. She had not expected him to introduce the subject just at this moment nor quite in this way.

"Yes. One very good reason is that I must have money for this place. There's no good thinking I shall ever get it out of the land itself. I want capital and shall have to marry a rich woman—an American millionairess for choice; I don't like Jews."

The window lay in sunshine on the floor and she watched it quickly fade and reappear as a cloud passed. Though only a sigh of wind had come between his words and hers, she could scarcely believe that her reply had not followed an awkward silence.

"That's all right. I don't think Jews are usually as rich as Americans."

"What about the Rothschilds?"

"What about the Woolworths?—and the Singers?—and Henry Ford?"

"Not as rich as Rothschild, though probably rich enough for me. I don't want more than a million or so."

"And what would you do with a million?"

He began to tell her quite seriously, describing the plans he had made for the improvement of the house and farms, the paying off of mortgages and the acquiring of more land and stock. It was evidently a long and lovingly built construction of the future—but she did not listen. Her mind lagged behind in his earlier remark about marrying a rich woman. Had it been a warning? Had he wanted to show her that they could be no more than friends? Or had he just been throwing about the dust of conversation? Certainly a great deal of what he said could not be taken seriously and possibly all of it amounted only to an extravaganza on the fact that he was poor and that his future was mortgaged to his estate. It might not be possible for him to marry for some time. Like Toby a couple of years ago he might feel obliged to wait till the end of the war. She found it hard to believe that he wanted no more than friendship, and he was too mature, too deeply conscious of his times, to be content with a little aimless love-making. Nor did she believe that anyone so rooted in the traditions both of the country and of the county would dream of any connection except marriage with an unmarried girl of his own class. She was not familiar with the Squirearchy, but she felt that their attitude towards such things must be conservative and unlike that of her literary friends. In fact she could not imagine him without design or without honour; nevertheless his words had given her a sick feeling of disappointment. Whatever their meaning, whether heavy or light, they could not be regarded as a prelude to an immediate proposal of marriage. She must still remain, perhaps for a considerable time, in uncertainty. Her future had withdrawn behind another hill.

"What about lunch?"

He had shown her the house and garden and they were standing where a little summer-house looked out over the fields towards the high woods beyond Loneham and Maidenbower. The house, which had lost its ancient beauties to a Victorian restorer, was hidden away among the firs that the same restorer had planted.

"It's nice and shady here, with a good view . . . mercifully we don't have to look at the house. That's another of the things I mean to do—make the place look something like what it did when it was first built. There's lots of the old stuff surviving under all that nineteenth-century rubbish."

"It seems to me," said Myra, "that it will be a long time before you can live in it if you want to do so much to it first."

"Oh, I shall live in it as soon as I can afford to, whatever it's like. But my first idea is to live at one of the farms. It wouldn't cost much to make one of them comfortable and I could work the estate just as easily from Haneholt or Pyramus as from the Manor House."

This did not suggest a millionaire bride and Myra felt her heart lifting.

"Which farm will you choose?" she asked almost gaily.

"That's where I want you to help me. Haneholt has the best house, but the farmyard's right up against it and I don't see how it can be moved. Crowlink is modern and hideous. Lordaine is too far down in the valley—the mist lies over it all night. Pyramus stands high and handsome, but I fear it may want almost as much doing to it as this place."

"It won't need any changes to its appearance—it's lovely to look at."

"Have you ever been there?"

"No; but you get quite a good view of it from the back of Ellenwhorne."

"Well, it's certainly a beautiful old house, but rather dilapidated. Nothing's been done to either the house or the buildings since about the year 1900. However, you shall see the lot and tell me what you think. But we'll have something to eat first."

He fetched the luncheon basket from the car, and as he set out the food and wine—the lobster salad, the chicken in aspic, the strawberries in brandy—she registered another difference between him and Toby Street. For the first time she was comparing them unfavorably (if in this instance a little ungratefully), realizing that Toby had a

quality that she missed in Lawrie. That quality was simplicity. Yet the acknowledgement took nothing from his attraction for her—she preferred him with all his extravagances. Indeed the only reason why she deplored them was that simplicity would have served her better. If Lawrie had had Toby's ideas of board and lodging—boiled silver-side of beef and a shabby old house in its neglected garden; if the Buckroses had had no larger ambitions than the Streets—three hundred acres of thriving freehold and the respect of every farmer in the county, there would have been no need for him to hesitate (for that was how she had explained to herself his inconsistencies) between her and an unknown heiress. Apart from the question of money there was nobody better fitted than herself to help him restore his inheritance. She loved it—she loved him . . . they could be perfect workmates, if only he would plan less consequentially, more as Toby would have planned, so that these things they both loved should form a part of their love for each other instead of their love being sacrificed to them.

Her mind was still heavy with this thought when, later in the afternoon, she set out with him to drive from farm to farm. The day was hot and quiet, with a golden haze over the sky, as if the ripening corn had stained it like buttercups held under a milkmaid's chin. In the long, unscythed grass of the hedge-rows—for labour was scarce and could not be given to the lanes—fleabane and knapweed carried on the duet of gold and purple that had begun in March with primroses and violets. Over the hedges wayside trees drooped heavy leaves towards the dust, which rose in a cloud behind the wheels and choked the stuffy shade.

They drove first of all to Haneholt's Farm, at the head of the Tillingham valley. The small tarred dwelling-house, huddled in a clump of barns, certainly looked incapable of transformation into the kind of house that Lawrie would live in even temporarily. Myra did not like it, and her conviction that it would be possible to live in it as it stood, without moving the farmyard to the back and making a garden, was mainly academic.

"The dining-room at Ellenwhorne looks straight into the yard, and nobody's ever complained."

"Then Joe Street's midden can't smell like this," said Lawrie.

"Or perhaps, being a working farmer, he doesn't notice it."

"Do you notice it?"

"Not enough to make me wish he'd spend several hundred pounds turning the place round."

"I think you'd notice it here," said Lawrie, "and anyway the house is too small."

When he had shown her the buildings and a distant view of Haneholt's four hop-gardens, nursed under the lea of Sleiches Wood, he declared that there was nothing more to see and they set out for Lorraine.

Here the bailiff lived, and though she found him an agreeable and obviously capable man, Myra could not help resenting him as another of Lawrie's extravagances.

"You won't be needing a bailiff after the war," she said when they had been left to walk round the place by themselves.

"I could never manage four farms without a bailiff, and Shingrove's a good man. I shall find plenty of use for him after the war, when there'll be more to do than we can spare time even to think of now."

"Then you're not afraid of an agricultural slump when the government prices are taken off?"

"If that happens, I'll be more than ever in need of a man like Shingrove to help me. It's no use, Myra—I'm not a working farmer and I don't think that even you can turn me into one."

He gave her a smile that took her mind off the bailiff; then he said half angrily:

"If you want a working farmer you had better marry Toby Street."

She looked quickly at him, trying to read his thoughts; but they eluded her and she felt it safer to reply in a lighter tone than he had spoken.

"I don't want a working farmer as much as all that."

"I'm glad," he answered gravely; then he said, "Let's get on to Pyramus."

Once more they drove through more untended byways and soon found themselves in another farmyard. As she looked up at the old weather-beaten face of the dwelling-house, Myra remembered the time when she had seen it all as through the wrong end of a telescope, sitting in the garden at Ellenwhorne.

"I wonder how it came to be called Pyramus."

"In the old records it appears as Piramannys Garden, but I don't know exactly when it took its Shakespearean turn. There's a 'lost'

place here too, called Colespore. No buildings are left, but the name still belongs to a field."

Myra stood silently gazing round her, letting her eyes fill her heart with the sunny, homely beauty of it all. A little garden of mixed flowers separated the house from the brick-paved yard, which sloped away from it down to the oast-barn with its two swelling kilns; the midden and pigsties and other drawbacks to superior residence were hidden behind a low range of buildings. At a very small cost, she noted partly in mockery, partly in eagerness, it could be made into a deputy Manor House, secluded in its garden and courtyard, while retaining the working properties of a farm. The house itself attracted her with its pippin-red tiles and tall, hipped gable that seemed to lean forward as if peering through its crooked windows into the garden below. A hop-bine trailed over the porch and a steamy scent rose from the huge calico clump of phlox beside the door. The weight in her heart became an ache as she felt herself falling in love with the house as well as with the man.

He did not ask her how she liked it till he had shown her the barns and lodges, which were old-fashioned, but well kept and not so badly in need of improvement—at least according to her ideas and Ellenwhorne standards—as he had suggested. Afterwards they stood on a treeless mound beyond the steading, from which it was possible to see the farm's two hundred acres sloping to the fatting-grounds of the Tillingham marshes. Then as they turned back towards the yard and their waiting car, he suddenly opened a gate that led into a little orchard at the back of the house.

"Let's go in here for a minute." Then, as they stood in an apple-smelling cage of weighted boughs, he asked her: "How do you like Pyramus?"

"Very, very much—better than the other places I've seen so far."

"You aren't going to see any more. We can give Crowlink a miss; it isn't really worth showing to you—and time's getting on, Myra dear."

The sun had moved out of the south and the afternoon, though still day, had reached its change of light. Myra felt her heart sink still further; her day was nearly over and none of its hopes had been fulfilled. When she had set out that morning her mind had been clear and hopeful as the sky, but now it was all hazed over with heats that rose from but could not leave the earth.

She tried to keep her disappointment out of her voice as she said:

"This house would be a lovely place to live in."

"If I come out of the mess over there I probably shall live in it some day—while I'm rebuilding Bewbush. I'm so glad you like it, Myra—that's really important. And now, my darling, we must say good-bye to it and I must drive you to the station, where we must say good-bye to each other—unless you're willing to stop with me tonight."

She was taken so completely unawares that she could only say:

"I thought you were spending tonight at your sister's."

"I told her I hoped I should be able to get to her tonight, which was a lie, of course. She won't be at all surprised if I wire and say I won't be there till tomorrow morning."

Myra said nothing. Her thoughts were starting up like hares, and she did not know which to pursue.

"I'm sorry to have arranged it so badly," he continued, "but all this has taken me by surprise. It's hellish—I wish I could have done it differently. I shall next time—if I ever come back."

Her burdened, exhausted heart nearly broke on his last words. "If I ever come back . . ." Here in the Tillingham valley the guns were silent that had beaten the air of Ellenwhorne; but the peaceful, apple-sweet quiet held a threat of anguish that she had not heard when she heard the guns. That anguish, in spite of her efforts, must have shown itself in her face, for Lawrie cried:

"Myra, don't look like that. What are you thinking of?"

She tried to speak, but failed, and the next moment he had taken her into his arms, where she felt no joy, only a sense of parting and desolation mixed with a curious detached perception of the difference between his kiss and Toby's. He kissed her as if he were slaking his thirst, and after a time her body began to respond, finding comfort and tenderness, not so much in him as in their passion, as if they were both being held and comforted by some invisible power outside themselves.

He let her go at last with a long sigh.

"Myra, wonderful, lovely Myra—why have I found you so late?—too late, perhaps."

She cried almost angrily, "Don't say that!"

"Very well, I won't say it; and perhaps it isn't true. But I wish we hadn't been so careful and wanted to make sure before committing ourselves. If tonight is all we're to have of each other, the past

is to blame and our own ditherings as much as the future and the Brass Hats. We are going to have tonight, aren't we, lovely?"

She could not say No, any more than she could tell him how differently she had imagined. She lacked the will to refuse anything of himself that he would give her, though some survival of her upbringing sat up in her mind and said, "I'm shocked at you; I'm shocked at him. I never knew that you were either of you like this."

She asked him:

"Where are we going?"

"Well, my sweet, I'm afraid we haven't much choice—some pub somewhere between here and Angmering, where we're neither of us known. My luggage will do for us both as far as appearances are concerned, and for realities we can buy you a toothbrush in Lewes."

Something jarred in her mind, but she ignored it.

"I wish we could stay here."

"So do I; but quite plainly we can't. And I don't suggest our going to your little place either, because we're both too well known in these parts. I'm sorry it's all got to be so furtive and extempore, but I promise you, sweet angel, that everything will be different next time—if I come back."

She wished he would release her from those words.

## V

THE year 1916 passed. America entered the war, while at home conscription was introduced, income-tax rose to six shillings in the pound and Marlingate streets, both old and new, became shrill with the complaints of housewives who could not buy what they wanted.

"There's no good telling me, Sibylla, that Budgen's hasn't got any China tea. I passed the shop only yesterday and the window was full of it."

"But it was only dummy cartons, Mother. There was nothing inside them."

"How do you know there was nothing inside them?"

"I asked him, of course. I said to him, 'You've dozens of packets in the window.' After all, I'm not blind and I saw the packets just the same as you did."

"Don't talk to me like that, Sibylla. Really I don't know what's come over you lately."

"I'm sorry, Mother."

She really was sorry. She wished she could keep out of her voice the exasperation that she continually felt. When she confessed her sins to Father Hardcastle it was always "I have been rude to my mother," which was much more difficult to say than "I have had a love-affair with a married man." Her mother seemed to be getting old and fragile now, which made it much worse. She no longer went down to the shops every morning, though she still remained in authority at home, giving orders and checking results. There was nothing definitely wrong with her, the doctor said, but she had passed her seventieth birthday and she could not be expected to go about as much as she used to do. Unfortunately, it was only her body that had lost energy —her mind was as vigorous and autocratic as ever; and the fact that her daughter must now do many things that she had formerly done herself only made her more critical of her shortcomings.

Sibylla had quite settled down into her position as "daughter-at-home." She no longer imagined herself doing or being anything different from what she was now. There were many like her in Marlingate, where an older generation flourished more freely than in other parts of the country. The retired military and professional class that lingered on in the superior streets of the town had kept their girls from marriage partly by isolation, partly by taboo, and were now in their old age reaping the fruit of their selfishness in the constant attendance of these middle-aged "girls," whom Armageddon itself had been powerless to release.

Sibylla did not feel conspicuous or isolated in her situation. Marlingate was full of women like herself. She met them at the Red Cross and the canteen, where they were allowed to go for a little genteel war-work; they made up a proportion of the congregation at St. Nicholas' Church. They all believed that they were doing their duty, that they loved their parents and that they were lucky to have such good homes. If other thoughts and desires intruded, they either found their way into Mr. Hardcastle's confessional or were trodden into the limbo of lost personality. As for Sibylla, she found in herself a growing attachment to Number Four Monypenny Crescent, to the rooms and passages that had housed her for so long—a feeling as if she and they were part of the same existence and must never be sepa-

rated. She had wept and longed and hoped and grieved so much among it all that she seemed now almost to find company in the furniture of rooms and the shapes of doors and windows. She was quite glad that war conditions disinclined her mother for a summer holiday, and she resolutely refused the invitations that both Myra and Kitty sent her to come and spend a few days in London. She did not want to leave her home, she did not want to leave her church; she did not know that in giving way to this reluctance she was giving way to what she once had dreaded most.

She was not quite in the same position as some other daughters, for she had two unmarried sisters, one of whom actually lived in the house with her mother and herself. But Georgie could not be accurately described as a "daughter-at-home"; she had too much of an independent life—still mainly occupied with coaching games at schools and playing golf. Sometimes Mrs. Landless complained of her being out so much, but Georgie never offered to give up any of her interests or to stay at home, as Sibylla would have done; she just said nothing and went on as usual, and Mrs. Landless accepted the situation with only an occasional fuss. She even sometimes boasted of her daughter's achievements: "Georgie coaches the hockey team at St. Mildred's—they've won the South Eastern Schools cup again this year"—"She's taking on the First Eleven at Highfield House next summer"—"It's wonderful what an interest she takes in it all. She loves doing it—for of course she never dreams of accepting payment,"—this to counteract one or two malicious rumours that were circulating in the town.

She did not boast in the same way of Myra, who was certainly not above accepting payment for her work; though she occasionally spoke of "my two daughters doing war-work in London," forbearing to mention the fact that one of them was paid. On the whole, Marlingate—at least its superior parts—was inclined to see something derogatory in women being paid for war-work. Men, of course, were different, whether in the Army or the Navy or the Ministry of Munitions; but women who took salaried jobs were suspected of ulterior motives and could not be considered really patriotic. Violet Faircloth and Sibylla had some of their more distressing wrangles over Myra's position.

"It isn't as if there wasn't plenty of work for her to do in Marlingate if she'd come and live at home. Heaven knows I find it difficult enough to get people for the canteen. I was on duty fifteen hours last Wednesday, and ready to drop."

Marlingate was now full of convalescent soldiers, who had considerably changed the outward aspect of its streets. A big Y.M.C.A. canteen occupied the Pier Pavilion, but Violet, failing in her attempt to secure control of this, had quarrelled with the managers and opened a rival establishment at the Assembly Room. Here she had persuaded her friends and various humbler workers to support her, and here Sibylla spent two afternoons a week—often multiplied to four or six by defaulters and involving her in a tug-of-war between Violet's claims and those of Monypenny Crescent.

Though she was a spinster who had only just stopped calling herself a girl, Violet did not belong to the order of daughters-at-home. It was more than a year since she had been anybody's daughter, for her mother had died in the autumn of 1915, leaving her extremely well provided for if not actually rich. She no longer lived in the house in Pelham Square, which had been bought by a speculative builder, who intended after the war to convert it and its next-door neighbour into a block of flats. Her new home was in Rye Lane, which she insisted on calling the country on the strength of a couple of fields as yet unbuilt on. It was small and neat and labour-saving, and Sibylla, toiling with the deficiencies of war-time servants, envied her immunity in this respect as in many others. She was always trying to close a mental cinema which showed her as the main features of its forbidden programme a picture of Violet coming home in the evenings and sitting down by a comfortable fire to the delicious tea which the old servant she had brought with her from Pelham Square always managed to produce in spite of war scarcities.

She might be "ready to drop" but what did that matter when she was free to lie back on the cushions without being told to sit up, to put her feet on the fender without being told that she was spoiling her shoes, to read a book or a magazine without being told she had no manners and urged to talk brightly? And then ahead of her lay the whole long blissful evening of silence and relaxation, and perhaps a bath—really hot—before Maria brought in her dinner: clear soup, with sherry in it (for Violet fed as well when she was alone as when she had company), roast chicken (for Violet didn't mind what she paid for anything she really wanted, though she was often highly critical of others who did so) and trifle (for Violet was one of those people who could always get cream). Then after dinner she would go back to her book and her armchair and perhaps turn on her gramo-

phone, before she went to bed, just as early or just as late as she chose. Sibylla would willingly work till ready to drop, if she could drop into such freedom and relaxation as this. . . . She closed the cinema with an act of contrition just before it showed her Violet's feet on the mantelpiece.

There were other respects, however, in which Sibylla did not envy Violet, but, reversely, pitied her. Violet might be within certain limits the master of her fate, but she was not in any sense the captain of her soul. The freedoms and comforts of the house in Rye Lane were a poor substitute for the energizing, transforming Power with which Sibylla kept a fluctuating but persevering contact. Violet no longer called herself an agnostic, but from whatever angle—Unitarianism, Bahaiism or the shallows of theosophy—that she attacked Sibylla's religion she showed herself, in the latter's secret opinion, a poor creature, ill-equipped, ill-informed, blown about by every wind of doctrine. Violet often got the better of her in argument, owing to Sibylla's inability to think of the right answer at the right moment, but no verbal triumph could remove that impression of interior poverty. Outwardly Violet Faircloth might be rich and comfortable and independent, but inwardly she was poor and blind and naked. She knew nothing of the treasury to which Sibylla had access in St. Nicholas' Church. She was wont to deride her churchgoing, saying it was all because she was really in love with Mr. Hardcastle.

"If he was to go away you'd find you wouldn't want to go to church any more."

"I'm sure I should find no such thing. In our religion the priest doesn't intrude his personality into the services like ordinary persons do."

"Oh, but you see him about all the time. And you go to confession to him—don't tell me you don't."

Sibylla neither could nor would tell her any such thing; but though she had secretly felt her heart sink like a stone when Violet spoke about Mr. Hardcastle going away, she could not, even in her deepest and clearest examinations, find herself support for the belief that she was in love with him. Surely if she had been so in the smallest degree she would have been pleased instead of distressed when Georgie brought him home to tea, as she did from time to time after an afternoon's golf. If Sibylla knew that he was coming she would make a

pretext to go out, and have tea with Violet or Dolly Morison or even in a shop . . . that did not seem very like being in love.

"You always think everything's to do with being in love. I don't think it's nice at all."

"It may not be nice, but it may be true. There's a Viennese Professor called Sigmund Freud who has discovered that religion is entirely due to sex."

"Thanks; but I don't take my ideas from German professors."

"Since when was Vienna in Germany?"

"Well, it's in Austria, which is the same thing. They're both our enemies. I should think it very unpatriotic to read any of their books."

"Science knows no boundaries," said Violet smugly, and Sibylla, though inwardly raging, was unable to think of an effective reply.

Not very long afterwards the matter was put to the test in a way they had neither of them expected. Coming home late one rainy evening, Sibylla met Father Hardcastle in process of being shown out of the house by Georgie. The blood drained so suddenly from her heart that she felt almost sick and gave but a mumbled and senseless answer to his greeting.

"I'm sorry I can't wait—I've the Guild of All Souls service to take in five minutes. I'll see you again tomorrow," and he was gone, with a flash of his invigorating smile.

Sibylla gazed after him, wishing that he wore his cassock. She always liked to see him going about the town in his cassock and flowing cape and buckled shoes; and she thought that it was good for Georgie and her mother to see him as much as possible in ecclesiastical attire. But of course he could not have played golf in a cassock . . . had he really been playing golf on such a windy, rainy day as this?

"You must have got very wet," she said to Georgie as they went in.

"How?—wet?"

"Playing golf."

"Oh, we haven't been playing golf. Did you think we had?"

"I thought that was why Father Hardcastle was here."

"No. He just dropped in to tea . . . and you'll have to give up calling him Father Hardcastle."

"Why?"

Sibylla was astonished. Georgie was easy-going on religious matters—the last person from whom to expect a sudden "protty" outburst.

Also the look in her eyes and her smile as she spoke were more pleased than Protestant.

"I'll tell you—but not out in the hall." She opened the door of the little room that used to be Colonel Landless's study, but was now called "the library," on the strength of an early edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and some bound volumes of *Punch* and the *Graphic*.

As they went in, Sibylla had a sudden thought—so monstrous and ridiculous that she felt hot at the mere touch of it on her mind. But it struck her as a possibility that Georgie fancied Father Hardcastle might be in love with her. There was something so pleased and excited and at the same time mysterious about her manner that in the case of any ordinary male visitor such an idea would not have seemed incredible, and Georgie most probably knew nothing about clerical celibacy . . . she might have construed his politeness and friendliness, based on their common addiction to golf, as something more ardent. Sibylla's throat was dry as she realized the duty of undeceiving her. How should she ever be able to bring herself to discuss him on such a level? And yet poor Georgie should be warned of the vanity of her hopes before they became too confident, and he at all costs must be protected from the earthliness of such speculations. . . .

"Well," said Georgie, "how would you like him for a brother-in-law?"

"Who?" asked Sibylla feebly, as if she had no idea whom they were talking about.

"Tom Hardcastle of course."

Sibylla turned as deep a red as if it were she who had taken the liberty.

"Georgie, what do you mean? You mustn't talk of him like that."

"Sibylla, don't be an old ass. I'll talk of him any way I please. I'm going to marry him."

Sibylla suddenly sat down. The room had begun to move round her . . . she remembered having read somewhere that middle-aged women were liable to get obsessions about clergymen and doctors being in love with them. Georgie was forty-one . . . she must speak carefully.

"You really oughtn't to let your mind dwell on such things. Father Hardcastle isn't able to marry anybody."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"He's a priest and sworn to celibacy."

"Sibylla, what nonsense! He's asked me to marry him."

"He can't have!—he hasn't!"

Georgie looked at her as if she thought it was she who had to be spoken to carefully.

"Really, Sibylla, you're saying some very odd things and I don't understand what you're driving at. It's perfectly true that Tom proposed this afternoon and that I accepted him. Ask Mother if you still don't believe me. He's told her all about it."

Somehow all that Sibylla could say was:

"You never called him Tom till now."

"No, I didn't—not till we became engaged. We aren't a modern young couple—just two people who have met rather late in life and become such friends that the only thing to do is to marry each other."

A sob rose suddenly and broke in Sibylla's throat.

Georgie looked at her in consternation. "Sibylla, you're not in love with him yourself?"

"No, no, no!—how can you say such a thing?"

"But you're crying. . . ."

"I—I—you don't understand."

"No, I don't. That's perfectly true. Really, my dear, you must pull yourself together," for Sibylla was sobbing without restraint.

"If you're not in love with him," Georgie continued after a few moments, "I don't understand what you're crying about. If you are, I'm sorry—I really am. I'd no idea of it, or I should have been more careful about what I said."

"I'm not in love with him! I'm not in love!" cried Sibylla stormily. "I wouldn't dream of marrying him. I'd die rather than do such a wicked thing."

"My dear, I really can't speak to you any more," said Georgie and walked out of the room.

For some time Sibylla remained crying by herself; then as the first excitement of grief passed she realized that at any moment she might be discovered—in fact she thought she heard her mother's footsteps in the hall. Anything was better than that her mother should see her in such a plight. She had no longer any hope of her contradicting Georgie's intelligence; her sister's announcement

must be put down to a far more serious state of affairs than the aberrations of the female menopause. Something would have to be done about it, some appeal would have to be made, but what, or to whom, was at the moment beyond Sibylla's planning. Her one preoccupation was to seclude herself, to escape the atmosphere of triumph and congratulation that must be filling the house. She waited till she had heard the drawing-room door shut behind her mother, then, clutching her handkerchief in a wet ball, she ran upstairs to her own room.

As she lay weeping on the bed, she had a vision of herself weeping in that very room, on that very bed, nearly twenty years ago. The catastrophe that had blackened her life in that hour did not seem any more terrible than the catastrophe that blackened it now. Indeed this hour was the blacker of the two, because the first time she had lost no more than the dearest thing on earth, but now heaven itself was bereaved.

Number Four Monypenny Crescent was not organized for privacy, and Sibylla knew that she would have some difficulty in maintaining her refuge. In this respect her anguish was her best friend, for she had soon wept herself into a state when she could perfectly truthfully say she had a sick headache and could not come down to dinner. She was liable to occasional migraines and there was nothing in the message to astonish her mother, while Georgie, of course, would understand. Her only fear was that her mother might come upstairs to enquire after her and perhaps, indeed probably, start talking about Georgie's engagement. But in this her sister showed still further understanding. The message had been sent by Nellie, the crude little housemaid, to them both as they sat in the drawing-room, but it was Georgie alone who came upstairs.

“Sibylla, is there anything I can do?”

“No, thank you”—in a faint voice.

“Mother wants to know if you would like some Bovril sent up?”

“No, thank you—I don't want anything. And, Georgie, don't let her come to see me.”

“No, I won't. I'll tell her you're going to sleep.”

Georgie looked awkward and harassed as she stood at the foot of the bed. But the pleasure in her eyes was not gone—only masked.

Sibylla closed her own so that she should not see it looking out at her through the embarrassment.

"Are you sure there isn't anything you want?"

"Quite sure."

She wished Georgie would go away. She reminded her too much of Kitty and how she had stood there at the foot of the bed on that other occasion nearly twenty years ago. She had talked too much to Kitty and had afterwards regretted it, because Kitty had not understood her in the least. Georgie still less would understand—it would be quite impossible even to begin to explain things to her. Oh, how she wished she would go! . . . She opened her eyes and found that she was gone.

The evening slipped into the night and the room became darkness, so that it was no longer necessary to shut her eyes when she did not want to see. Then the moon came and painted the shadow of the ash-tree on the blind. Sibylla slipped out of her hot bed and cooled herself at the window, pulling up the blind so that she was blotted and striped with the shadow of the tree, which fell across her like a net and spread on the floor behind her. Out of doors the little white houses of New Marlingate, with their palladian fronts, lay dreaming in the white bath of moonlight, like pale rocks under the sea, the trees in their gardens waving among them like seaweed. It was like a town under water . . . The drowned city of Marlingate . . . *La Cathédrale engloutie* . . . St. Nicholas' Church on the other side of the house lifting its spire among the jumbled roofs of the Old Town . . . empty aisles, with one red winking light . . . betrayed . . . the watcher has failed—the sentry has fallen asleep at his post—the monk has walked out of the monastery garden . . .

The tears rolled down her cheeks as she thought of his lost heritage—not merely lost, but thrown away. And for what? Georgie! She could not understand what had tempted him. His choice of her sister certainly did not suggest the lustng of the flesh against the spirit. Georgie was forty-one and had never been good-looking. She perhaps looked better now than she had ever looked as a girl, for her figure had dignity, and her life of outdoor games had given her at least the grace of vigorous health. But even so she was not a likely weapon for Satan to choose to tempt a man from his spiritual integrity. "We're just two people who have met rather late in life and become such friends"—Georgie's words seemed to

scald her heart . . . "such friends." How could he be friends with a girl who took no real interest in religion, who wasn't in any sense an Anglo-Catholic, whom he had met, and wooed apparently, while playing golf? If he wanted friendship, why hadn't he turned to Sibylla? She could have met him on the level of his spiritual life . . . their intercourse would have been entirely on the high ground of the spirit . . . like St. Benedict and St. Scholastica, or St. Francis de Sales and—who was it?—Madame Jane Somebody. But he hadn't appeared to want anything like that—only golf! . . .

She clenched her fists. She was feeling angry now—she saw him as an impostor and a sham. He was no Catholic priest, for all his dressing like one—only an ordinary, marriageable, marrying clergyman. Back on her bed now, Sibylla rolled her body in rage and anguish, muffling her sobs in the pillow . . . he was no better than Mr. Blake at All Hallows'—worse, because at least Mr. Blake had not made a vow of celibacy. But this man—this priest—who had helped her to find her soul had perjured his own. He had broken his solemn vow to God. As she saw his fault removed from the courts of earth to the courts of heaven her anger left her and she pleaded for him: O God, forgive him—God save him. Help me to save him. As he once saved me, let me save him now.

When the silvery white of moonlight became the papery white of dawn, Sibylla slept for an hour or two, exhausted. Her mind escaped from its fiery furnace into a childish limbo of trees and flowers, all more brightly lit and more gaily coloured than anything in the waking world. Here she wandered in delight till a bell rang that she thought was the bell for tea in the nursery school where her mother had left her on her first return from India—so far had she run away from the present moment. She walked towards the house in the brilliant sunshine, accompanied by a little girl whom she had never seen since those days but who now seemed inexpressibly dear to her. A piano was playing, as a piano so often played on those sunny afternoons at school. But what was this tune? Twenty years hence we shall be . . . she looked up and saw John Roker.

Breathless, trembling, she sat up as if she had had a horrible nightmare. She was hot and sweating—and the tea-bell was still ringing, now resolved into the bell of St. Nicholas' Church ringing its daily summons to worship over the town. As if still carrying out the response in her dream, she slipped from bed and began to

dress. She would be late, but she would be in time to catch him before he left the church. She knew now, as plainly as if the dream had told her, what she must do.

The congregation at the early service seldom amounted to more than half a dozen people. Sibylla felt conspicuous as she scrambled in just before the end, and swallowed hard on her tears as she knelt down as far as she could from the altar. There he stood in his vestment of burning gold; his back was turned to her and the descending light baptized him into his old integrity. Oh, if only he could stand there for ever, apart from her yet expressing her deepest, truest self, his outstretched arms a barrier rather than an invitation, his head aureoled in the light, his mouth weaving the words that bound her with an ever-tightening web of hallowed associations . . . if only he could stand there for ever in his integrity and she kneel there for ever in her remoteness and reverence! . . . But already he was gone. Following the server, who carried the altar-book, he had left the sanctuary. He was in the vestry now and she must go to him there. It was her duty. It was her only chance.

“May I speak to Father Hardcastle?”

Her tongue felt too big for her mouth and her hands were cold and sticky inside her gloves as she stood in the doorway, with the server between her and the tall figure that bent over some registers on a table under the window.

“Come in—come in.”

He had turned round and seen her. The server had gone away and she was alone with him, moistening her lips with her dry swollen tongue. He seemed to loom in the little room—big and black . . . he was wearing his cassock today, and his biretta, and his buckled shoes; but today they seemed like fancy dress.

“Sibylla—this is nice of you.”

She stiffened at the sound of her name on his lips, but when he held out his hand she was unable to help putting hers into it. He continued to hold it as he said:

“I’m so glad you came here. I hope you thought of us both at the Mass.”

Sibylla answered truthfully: “Yes, I did.”

“Of course you did; and I’m grateful to you for coming to see us off, as it were, in this way. I hope you’ll come now and have a

cup of tea with me at the Rectory, and then we can walk up together to Monypenny Crescent."

"I can't do that," said Sibylla gruffly. She wished that she could do more than speak in this rough broken way, but though her heart was seething with a torrent of words nothing would pass her lips but these poor jerks.

"Can't you really? I shan't keep you long and your mother will guess where you are."

"It isn't that," said Sibylla, fighting desperately; "it's—it's—"

"What is it?"

His smile devastated her. She could have cried out in agony, and agony passing into anger she was able to speak.

"It's you," she cried, "and what you're doing. Oh, don't you see how dreadful it is?"

He stared at her, his smile wiped out.

"What do you mean, Sibylla?"

"I mean that you can't marry Georgie. You're a priest—you can't marry."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm as free to marry as other priests—in the Church of England."

"But you're not like one of them. You're different. You're vowed to celibacy."

On his face she saw both enlightenment and irritation.

"I'm nothing of the kind. Who ever put that idea into your head?"

"No one—I mean everyone. Everyone in the congregation takes for granted that you're a celibate priest, and now if you marry Georgie . . . Oh, can't you see the scandal, the contempt—"

He interrupted her.

"No, I can't. I've as much right to marry whom I choose as any other man. I can't help what a pack of old women are saying about me. Next time you hear them discussing me you can tell them that I'm not a celibate, but a man who has remained unmarried because he hasn't till now met the person he wanted. I confess that I had almost come to the conclusion that I should never meet her. But I have certainly never taken any vows; and now your sister—"

"I can't understand," cried Sibylla frantically, "I can't understand. You haven't got anything in common with Georgie. She isn't inter-

ested in religion—she doesn't know anything about it. She goes to All Hallows' Church."

"My dear Sibylla, what *are* you saying? Your sister's religion may not be of the same kind as yours, but you really can't say she doesn't know anything about it. She's a communicant of the Church of England; she says her prayers, she goes to Church, she is full of unselfish interest in other people. The reason she doesn't avail herself of certain Church privileges is that she's never till now had her interest aroused in them." Was there any reproach in his voice? "I'm afraid," he added, "that when I think of how all these devout women at St. Nicholas' must have been gossiping about me, I feel that I was wise to have chosen a wife from"—his smile hovered—"outside the fold."

Sibylla gulped.

"Will she go to St. Nicholas' when you're married?"

"I shall certainly be surprised if my wife and I do not attend the same church. We think alike on practically every subject, so I can't imagine that we hold different views on this very important one. We're neither of us young, so our marriage will have the advantage of being based on friendship rather than on more fleeting attractions. It was because I saw we were becoming such friends that I—Sibylla, what's the matter? Are you ill?"

She had collapsed on one of the gothic chairs that furnished the vestry and was sobbing bitterly into her gloved hands.

"Sibylla, what *are* you crying for?"

She did not know herself—she knew only that her whole being seemed to have dissolved, to have become fluid, to have become tears . . . He fetched her a glass of water and she forced herself to drink it, because she really wanted to stop crying, to control this dissolution of grief.

"My dear girl, do try to get a more balanced view of things. You've been feeding your mind with some very strange and unfortunate ideas. You ought to get about more and have more worldly interests." He smiled. "That may seem odd counsel from a priest, but you're not a nun, you know, and perhaps you may have lived too much like one. Can't you get away from home for a little?"

She shook her head.

"I don't see how I can."

"Couldn't you go and stay with one of your sisters in London?"

You may find yourself more tied than ever when Georgie is married."

She thought: He'd like to get me out of the way till then; he thinks I'm going to be a nuisance.

She struggled to her feet.

"I must go home."

"Won't you have a cup of tea first? You don't look fit to go home as you are."

"I'm all right."

"But you don't look all right. I really don't think you can go home in that condition. Sibylla, you must think a little of Georgie—she'll be dreadfully upset if she sees you looking like that and knows your attitude towards her engagement. Do think of her a little."

Standing up, Sibylla could see herself in the vestry mirror—a tall, untidy-looking woman, with uncoiling hair and a pale, blotched face, aged with grief. Another woman stared at her from another mirror over the emptiness of many years.

"All right," she said dully. "I won't go yet."

"You'll stay and have breakfast with me."

"No thank you. I'll go to Violet Faircloth—I hope you don't mind—I'd rather."

"Very well; but you'll promise me you'll have some breakfast."

"Yes, I promise."

"I'll tell them that's where you've gone."

"Thank you."

She went out.

Her decision to go to Violet Faircloth did not survive her arrival in the street. She saw at once the folly of such an idea, since she could neither hide her suffering nor expect from Violet any treatment that would not inflame the wound. Violet, of course, would say only one thing: "I told you so. You're in love with him—you've always been in love with him." And Violet, within the limits of her low guessing, would be right. She saw that now, and the realization was an almost intolerable part of her burden. I love him—I want him—but not in the way Violet thinks, not in my arms. I want him to be always as I saw him this morning at the altar, apart from me, above me, a different sort of being from myself. I want to be able to look up and adore him. How can I do that if he marries my sister

and his private life becomes a part of mine? I've lost him—not because he's gone away but because he's come too near.

This doleful clarity went with her down the street. She was walking away from New Marlingate, from the breakfast-tables laid in Rye Lane and Monypenny Crescent. She could not go home, for he would soon be there, and it did not matter where she went for the next hour or two, since he would tell them she had gone to Violet Faircloth's. She would go and have a cup of tea and a roll and butter at Brown's—her legs felt weak and her head sang with weariness. She could not go without breakfast altogether.

But at Brown's they would recognize her—Mrs. Brown and the waitresses all knew her and would wonder why she was having breakfast there and not at home. Also if she was still looking the same as she had looked in the mirror, and there was no reason to suppose that a cold sea-wind had improved her appearance, their curiosity would be still further and more embarrassingly aroused. She had better go somewhere where she was not known—some place in the fishermen's quarter. There was in the Old Town a number of small shops where tea was sold by the cup, and all she wanted was a cup of tea. She remembered one in Zuriel Place, and turned into it out of High Street by Budgen's shop.

A blank and grimy window deterred her with a vague flutter of alarm. But a notice scrawled in chalk on a blackboard, "Pot of tea and roll and butter, 4d.," invited her to go in. She found a counter and two scrubbed wooden tables at one of which a man who looked like a 'bus conductor was consuming tea and kippers. Sibylla felt as much out of place as he would have felt among the marble-topped tables and beribboned sugar-tongs at Brown's, but having met the eye of the women behind the counter she found herself without the courage to go out.

"Might I have a pot of tea and a roll and butter, please."

"Right you are, lady. Sit where you like."

Sibylla sat down at the table where the 'bus conductor was not and waited nervously while tea was squirted into a pot from the counter urn and brought to her with a dab of butter and a very solid-looking roll.

"Fourpence, please," said the woman. Evidently nothing was being left to chance, and Sibylla, contrary to all previous experience, paid before she ate.

She did not really want to eat at all, but she drank greedily of the tea. It warmed and refreshed her; it dissolved the hard lump of her thoughts so that they moved more quickly, if only in their old rut; it watered the little root of self-knowledge that had begun to grow in her heart. She knew that once again she had been deceived, this time by herself; that much of her attachment to St. Nicholas' Church had been her attachment to Father Hardcastle—no, no, she must never think of him as that again. If she did, Georgie would be Mother Hardcastle . . . No, he was Mr. Hardcastle—or rather Tom . . . Tom, Tom, Tom, a little boy's name, a naughty little boy's name . . . her thoughts were scattering—floating away in tea . . . Tom, Tom, Tom . . . her face twisted suddenly, then straightened as she met the astonished gaze of the 'bus conductor across the room.

What a triumph for Violet Faircloth! She had said that some German professor taught that religion is only sex in disguise, and now of course, unless Sibylla was very clever, much cleverer than she expected to be, she would consider the matter proved. Was that really all that it all had been?—all her delights and struggles, the deep strong comfort of her soul? Were they only so many manifestations of her passion for an ordinary, normal man—John Roker under another name?

She felt her face burning and stared down at her plate. She saw that she had made a fool of herself a second time, and not so unlike the first, either . . . That scene in the vestry—she would never forget it, any more than she would forget that scene in the ballroom, which for years had ceased to haunt her but which had now suddenly risen up in all its old reproach and power. And to whom should she go this time?—who would befriend her and entangle her again?

She crumbled her roll, trying to break it up into pieces small enough for her to swallow. She felt like a child who has been turned out of doors into the dark and cold. She had lost her kind nurse. Never again would she know the joy of telling him her troubles and taking his advice. As Georgie's husband only the most external and formal contacts would be possible—formal yet familiar. . . . She shuddered, as across her mind shot the picture of him and Georgie in a double bed. The picture was devoid of even the mildest sensuousness, in fact it was framed in a contempt almost amounting to

disgust of all the common routine of a bedroom and a bed—wash-stand, dressing-table (would he see Georgie take down her hair?), sheets, blankets (isn't it too warm for the eiderdown tonight?) . . . sorry if I woke you, turning over. Did Georgie snore—did *he* snore?

Her cheeks were crimson and she was almost in a frenzy with the tickle of laughter at the bottom of her grief. Oh, what a cure for love, if love it was! She hoped, she prayed, that he and Georgie would have separate beds, separate rooms if possible. "If possible" . . . the conditional prayer of her childhood came back into her heart and again she nearly laughed as she thought how far already she had fallen away from the technicalities of ordered meditation and the sonorities of liturgical worship. She had become spiritually again the little girl whose only use for heaven was that she wanted this or was frightened of that. . . .

So when she lost him she had lost her religion, too. That was what Violet Faircloth would say, anyhow; but was she as right about this as she had been right about the other? I may have been in love with him—I have been in love with him; I'll be honest about that. But is that all there was to it—nothing but that? Nothing in all my prayers and pious practices but the sentimental devotion of a schoolgirl to her "pash"? . . . All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags . . . no fine linen, no cloth-of-gold, only the dirt of a weary, frustrated mind turning in upon itself and finding dirt—sex—everywhere. Well, Violet had said that about sex, not she; those horrors of the imagination were all Violet's and Professor Somebody's. But were they right? Her mind drearily repeated the question. How could she know? She knew only that when she saw the altar she saw him standing in front of it; his tall, shining figure was like a child's transfer stamped upon all the church-views in her mind. Without him everything was forsaken—dead—a body from which the soul is gone.

Oh, no, no, no, no—that was unbearable. That was the thought she could not face—that there was nothing in it all but him. If Violet was right there, then life was no longer worth living or death worth dying. . . . She was beginning to cry again, and lifted her hand to hide her face. If she was to lose the altar as well as the priest . . . She would gladly lose him over again if she could only keep what he had given her.

Knowest thou not that the Lord will take away thy father from

thy head today? . . . a gate seemed to open in her thoughts, as still groping in childhood's ways she saw a picture in some Bible picture-book, of Elijah whirling away to heaven in a fiery chariot, but casting down his cloak—the symbol of his power—to the disciple he had left on earth. The illustration could not be pressed very far—the symbolism became badly mixed up with Georgie, double beds and her own folly—but for the first time it struck her as possible that her counsellor might have been removed from her by heaven, because she had come to lean on him too heavily and must learn to manage alone. He had stood perhaps too long between her and the altar. . . .

But he had fallen—he had sunk. . . . There was no getting rid of that knowledge, no symbol of fiery chariots could disguise it; indeed Elijah's chariot had now become in her thoughts a much more earthly and familiar vehicle, which had taken away her father in a cloud not of fire but of stink and dust. She could not believe—even now when she thought she was reviewing the situation with a mind no longer clouded by hunger and fatigue and emotions so purged by her own horror at their violence that they seemed almost dead—even now she could not believe that he had acted in accordance with his higher nature in choosing Georgie, in taking for his helpmeet a woman whose attraction for him was built on a no more spiritual foundation than golf. He ought—if he was free to marry and did not shrink from its earthly implications—to have chosen a woman at least as spiritually minded as himself, a woman whose fervour would have been a spur to his, with whom he could have shared the secret aspirations of his soul, with whom he could have entered the kingdom of heaven. . . . Her tears had begun to flow again and she could feel many more stormy waters raging in her breast. With relief she saw that her cup was empty and her plate a mere scatter of crumbs. She stood up, her face still working . . . she must go, or these people would notice something. What a good thing that she had paid before she ate. She went out into the street, mercifully unaware of the looks that followed her.

The morning had filled itself up a little. Already some early shoppers were about. The clock on the Town Hall pointed to a few minutes to ten, and the sun was high among the clouds above All Holland Hill, sending a broken windy light to move over the eastward frontages of High Street. Sibylla found herself automatically

crossing the road, knowing that she would have to cross back again at the French Gun in order to climb the hill to Monypenny Crescent. But though she realized what she was doing she did not retreat. Her legs had taken her this way before hundreds and hundreds of times, and they should take her again today. She turned into the passage beside the Town Hall that led into St. Nicholas' church-yard.

She was quite safe, for he would not be there—he had gone up to her mother's house. The very circumstance which yesterday would have seemed a drawback was today an advantage, and at this realization a great, deep comfort took possession of her soul. If he had not only gone but had taken everything with him she would not now be entering the church, still less would she be finding reassurance in the thought that he wasn't there. So Violet was wrong—her religion was not all sex and make-believe . . . it had contained and coloured these and they had coloured it, but it and they were not the self-same thing. The wood still flourished round the fallen tree.

Kneeling in her old place at the back of the north aisle, she felt her tears flow again, but less painfully. There was no one to see her now, to make her feel ashamed of herself. With a shudder she remembered that earlier scene in the vestry. "O God," she prayed, "help me to meet him as if nothing had happened."

She lifted her swimming eyes. The church seemed full of her tears . . . the red light of the altar lamp shone through them in a broken, stabbing ray. She prayed again, "O God, save him from falling away because of this."

Of course, she thought, Violet won't expect me to go to church any more after what's happened; and a little smile of triumph moved the corners of her mouth. This shows Violet and her professor that religion is real. . . . Oh, how glad I am I didn't go to see her! . . . Now I must behave as if I was pleased—I shan't pretend to like him very much, though. . . . I don't want—I don't think I can see much of him after this. O God, help me to be kind and sisterly to him and Georgie.

She gathered up her gloves and handbag. She had better go back at once to Monypenny Crescent and get it over. The churchyard, full of wind and sunshine, seemed to welcome her out of the shadows. This was much better, after all, than that other, first, time. . . . If she had been able to see John Roker again she would only have clung to

him more desperately than she had clung before. She had abased herself before him and shocked him, just as she had shocked this other man today, but her next meeting with Father Hardcastle (it would take her some time to learn to think of him as Tom) would not be like any possible next meeting she could have had with Roker. Religion had given her one thing which love had refused, and that was pride.

## VI

**S**IBYLLA was not the only member of Mr. Hardcastle's congregation who disapproved of his marriage. In fact so high rose the tide of criticism-reaching the mark of at least three anonymous letters, as well as several over familiar female signatures—that he decided to send in his resignation to the Bishop and apply for a living in some other part of the country. For the same reason both he and Georgie preferred to have as short an engagement as possible, and when he was offered the living of St. Cyprian's Church in Bedford, the wedding-day was fixed only two months ahead. Apart from the necessity of escape, the couple had nothing to gain by waiting—six months would not make them richer and it would certainly not make them younger; so the second marriage from Number Four Monypenny Crescent took place (after eighteen years) in much the same bustle as the first.

Both decisions were intensely welcome to Sibylla. It was a true comfort to know that he was going away—that she would not have to see him at St. Nicholas', with Georgie as a new and uninitiate member of the congregation, to visit them both at the Rectory or have the enclosure of her own unhappy home violated by their intruding happiness. Far away in the Midlands only letters would connect them, for, even if she had wished it, she could not leave her mother to go to stay with them and she did not expect them to have time for much visiting in Monypenny Crescent. Soon they would be out of her life—the strain of seeing them and speaking to them would be over far sooner than she once had dared to hope.

During those two months she had many bad and bitter moments, mixed with others of peace and exaltation, made many shocking exposures of herself as well as many displays of gentleness and gen-

erosity. When the wedding took place a number of people besides herself were relieved that the engagement had lasted no longer.

The ceremony was at the bride's parish church of All Hallows', and on quiet lines suitable both to the war and to the age of the bridal pair. Georgie was married in her travelling-dress and there were no bridesmaids, while only members of the family and a few old friends came afterwards to the reception, amounting to little more than a tea-party, at Monypenny Crescent. Mrs. Landless had organized it all and Sibylla had done the work, driven before her mother as before a wind. She looked tired and ill in her new dress of teal crêpe de chine, and years older—so her sister Myra thought, little knowing that Sibylla had thought the same of her.

The four sisters had not been together since Christmas, and the long, hard months of public adversity and private trouble had put their mark on all of them except Georgie, whom the counteractions of love and marriage had made to bloom more youthfully than in many an earlier year. Kitty still looked lovely, but in a thinner, more tragic way. Hugh had gone out to France again, after having been home three months with a wound in his thigh. Myra still felt sorry that he had made so quick a recovery; when she heard he was a casualty she had hoped for her sister's sake that he would be permanently out of the fighting. But a strong constitution had sent him back to those ultimate risks from which he had enjoyed too short a respite.

In vain did their mother entreat Myra and Kitty to stay longer; they went back to London the day after the wedding. They had to get back to work—there was nothing disingenuous about that excuse; at the same time they were glad not to have to stay on in the devastated house, where reaction to so much unwonted effort and festivity was already setting in. They both felt sorry for Sibylla, left alone to face the aftermath of the wedding. "But she shouldn't let Mother wipe her feet on her the way she does," said Kitty. "Mother's all right if you stand up to her, but once let her have the whip hand and she's a devil."

"I don't know why Sibylla does it; she's not a meek or weak character really—in fact she's rather violent and obstinate."

"That's just the pity of it. If she enjoyed being bullied one wouldn't feel sorry for her; but she doesn't."

"And yet she won't stand up for her herself, either, though you can see she's bursting to do it."

They both shook their heads over Sibylla. They were having tea together at Kitty's flat, resting and talking before Myra set out for St. John's Wood and her sister went on duty at the canteen.

"I can't think why Tom didn't marry her instead of Georgie," said Myra. "Apart from the fact that she's the pious one of the family, she's much better looking—even now."

"He doesn't seem the sort of man who'd notice that."

"But he might have noticed that she'd make a much better parson's wife than Georgie—especially a High Church parson. I don't suppose Georgie's ever been to church on a week-day in her life."

"He may not care about having a wife who's always in church. I daresay she'll be a lot of use rushing about the parish—she's never tired."

"All the same I think he'd better have chosen Sibylla, and I wish he had. She may be tiresome, but, between ourselves, I like her much better than Georgie and I'd like to feel she was happier than I know she is now."

"She probably frightened him away," said Kitty coolly, throwing her cigarette end into the grate. "That's what she always did to men—in the old days at Marlingate and later when she used to come and stay with me."

"Your men were a particularly nervous lot. I frightened them too."

"Oh, but then you're a writer—men are always frightened of a woman they think cleverer than themselves. But Sibylla isn't clever; she's only intense—dreadfully intense. She's still being intense and I dare say it frightened Tom."

"Well, I still think she's much more attractive than Georgie—and much more attractive than her dreadful friend Violet Faircloth. What a bore that woman is! I can't think what Sibylla sees in her."

"Her own youth, mostly, I imagine," said Kitty; "that friendship's been going on since before you were born, and I don't suppose either of them could stop it now. How well I remember Violet at the Marlingate dances! She used to dance like an elephant—Bertie Pym-Barrett once said she broke his toe."

Silence fell between them for a few moments; then Myra said: "I thought Mother looked pretty ill."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. She's vigorous enough in her mind, but you

can see there's a lot wrong with her in other ways . . . that dreadful dead colour . . . and she was exhausted after the wedding, though she'd hardly walked more than the length of the aisle and Sibylla had done all the dirty work."

"I'm sorry for her too," said Myra. "I'm sorry for her, even though she's so rumbustious. I'm sorry for all old people in this war, having their lives goaded and complicated just when they ought to be easing off. In some ways it must be more exhausting to harry and drive a person like Sibylla than to do things oneself."

"I'm afraid there's something coming to Mother that she'll mind more than war," said Kitty.

Her voice had changed so completely, had become so suddenly serious, that Myra was startled. She straightened up in her chair and looked at her sister, who had just lit another cigarette.

"What is it? Has anything happened?—not to Hugh?"

"It's something that's going to happen to Hugh as well as to Mother, though I think of the two Mother will mind the most. I'm going to tell you, Myra, but I don't want you to tell anyone else just yet. I'm going to divorce Hugh and marry again."

For a moment Myra was silent with astonishment.

"But—but—" she stammered.

"The new man's name is Howard Lintine," continued Kitty, running her words smoothly over Myra's attempt to speak, "and he works in the Ministry of Munitions. He's just about my age, and we have a great many ideas and tastes in common—much more than I ever had with Hugh. He's a widower, with no children, and he has a nice little place in Shropshire. I think you'll like him, Myra—he's read both your books."

"But—Hugh? . . . does he know yet? . . . What will he feel about it?—won't it break his heart? I mean, I really don't understand you—I thought you were so fond of him; and I've been feeling for you so much, with him wounded and out in France . . ."

She was blurting like a schoolgirl, full of resentment at Kitty for having misled her emotions so long.

"Hugh and I have been going our separate ways for some time," resumed Kitty, "ever since the beginning of the war, in fact. Things had got rather strained just before it, but I had an idea at first that the war might bring us together again. It didn't, of course. How could it?"

"But I thought——" Myra broke off. There was no good going on like this. After all, what did she really know about Kitty?—or, for that matter, Georgie?—or Sibylla? They were sisters, but spaced so widely that they stretched across a whole generation. No wonder that the links between them were weak and sagging. She had thought herself closer to Kitty, both in age and temperament, than to the other two; but even she and Kitty had no childhood in common, no early experiences shared. Kitty had always been an elder sister, living her drawing-room life apart from the child in the nursery. She had been kind and merry and talkative, but never confiding—and the last years had been the same as the first. Myra was probably still to her in secret the nursery child, just as Sibylla and Georgie were probably still the interfering elders from whom she must be protected by silence. Certainly she had kept Myra in the nursery all through this ripening crisis with Hugh. . . . An angry heat crept over her as she thought again of all the compassion she had wasted, imagining Kitty haunted and tormented by anxiety, hiding her sufferings under an appearance of gaiety which she saw now to be no mask but the face itself.

But the next moment she asked herself, why should Kitty confide in her, who had confided nothing? After all, she, Myra, had her own secrets which she would never carry across the years between them. She had taken as many precautions to hide her affairs as had her sister; concealment was one of the aspects of the situation which she had no right to criticize.

"Well," she said more calmly, "I won't say I'm not utterly surprised. I'd no idea that Hugh and you were on bad terms with each other. I must say you've managed the whole thing very discreetly."

"Well, what's the good of making a public mess? None of us want that, but I'll have to tell Mother soon, so I thought I'd prepare you."

"Mother will take it hard."

"I'm afraid she will, but of course it's all being done very respectably."

"You will do the divorcing, I suppose."

"Yes; he's agreed to that."

"Does he want to marry again?"

"Not at the moment, though I believe there's somebody . . . no one exactly marriageable. Poor old Hugh!"

Myra was silent. She had never deeply cared for her brother-in-law, and once she had lost her childish enthusiasm for his khaki uniform he had counted for very little in her life. He had always been rather a common male lump under all his accoutrements, and he had personally offended her by many small acts of disapproval and misunderstanding. Yet it seemed a terrible thing to divorce the man who had been one's husband for eighteen years, the father of children old enough to realize the situation in its fullness, the soldier fighting for his country. . . . She was shocked at her sister—no longer for her reticence but for what seemed to her a deliberate callousness.

"Mightn't it," she began—"mightn't it be better to wait till after the war?"

"But, my dear child, when is that going to be? It looks at the moment as if it was going on for ever. And even when we start proceedings we'll have to wait at least a year before we can get married. It wouldn't be fair to Howard if we delayed things now. As for Hugh, he'd find it all much more tiresome if the war was over and he was thinking of setting up a home again. At least he's got plenty to occupy him at the moment."

Myra said nothing, and Kitty went on:

"I'd like you to meet Howard before I tell Mother, just so that you'll be able to reassure her that he's quite all right and not some dreadful Don Juan."

"Mother's sure to take Hugh's side, whatever happens—just because he's in the Army."

"Yes, poor Mother! How she still swanks about her soldier son-in-law! You'd never think they were two-a-penny now."

"Why isn't your new man in the Army?" asked Myra, hoping that her voice did not sound too much like her mother's.

"Because he's got a tendency to duodenal ulcer—what they call a duodenal condition—and was rejected on medical grounds. So you needn't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You look as if you thought I was marrying a Cuthbert. It's having two young men in the trenches, I suppose."

Myra was startled.

"Two young men!—what do you mean?"

"Lawrie Buckrose and Toby Street. You write to them both, don't you?"

"Yes, but——"

"Oh, I dare say you don't really care a cent about either of them; though I think you're a fool not to marry Lawrie. But they give you the trenches' point of view, and you get worked up about other people's best boys who aren't in khaki. It's quite natural—so's the fact that at the moment I'm going through an anti-military reaction. I don't mean that I'm a pacifist or want the war to stop or anything like that, but I've lived with soldiers literally all my life—first the daughter of one, then the wife of another—and it's rather nice to be going about with a civilian for a change."

Myra smiled. She was both amused and reassured to learn from this apology how little Kitty knew about her.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm not criticizing you—or him. I've one or two friends who are conscientious objectors."

Kitty looked shocked.

"I draw the line at that. It's all very well if you have a duodenal ulcer or the wrong mentality for fighting; but to say it's wicked—well, *that* seems wicked to me."

Myra smiled again and said she must be going.

She took her luggage first to her flat, but decided to go out for a meal, as her cupboard was bare. When she left home she had been uncertain of her return and had laid in no supplies. But she was not sorry to have to go out again. Kitty's talk had made her think of Proudlock's and wonder who would be there tonight. Moreover, the mental confinement of Monypenny Crescent, especially its war-attitude of uncritical jingoism, had made her feel that a breath of very different air would do her good. At Proudlock's of an evening one usually met the young men who by day hung about the Bomb Shop—the bookseller's in the Charing Cross Road which had recently become the headquarters of the new revolution.

Pacifists and conscientious objectors had both declared themselves explosively since the arrival of conscription, and though Myra had no more affinity with either than with the militarism of Monypenny Crescent, a number of her friends still survived among them from early literary days.

The leading authors and artists of the times (whom she had seldom

met more than once, when they held out a condescending finger to the hopeful newcomer) were one and all doing their best against German *kultur*; but the more bohemian element, into which she had drifted from her attempts on high places, were arming themselves with talk—not against a foreign foe but against these of their own nation who would throw them out of their studios into the barracks and turn their pens and paint-brushes into rifles.

Myra found their company congenial only in small doses; but these were decidedly stimulating, and tonight she felt in need of stimulation. Both Monypenny Crescent and Kitty had sickened her a little: her mother always mouthing talk against the Huns, against the Cuthberts, against the women who were glad when their men came home too badly wounded to go out again; Kitty so smugly selfish in her manipulation of soldier and civilian, war and marriage. It would be a relief to argue with inspired consciences, even if certain of these were mainly inspired by funk, to listen to tales of Imperialistic cruelty and the atrocities of British sergeants on their own countrymen. She was disappointed when she came to Proudlock's to find that no one that she knew was there.

The room looked what it really was—a comfortable English tea-room, presided over by two respectable maiden ladies. At the few tables that were occupied so late sat one or two girls of the Civil Service type, eating a light supper before going to a film, one or two young men to match them and some quiet-looking soldiers on leave. Nowhere could she see the wild bobbed heads of the women: blazing Christine, with her tales of Rory O'Connor and the Dublin revolution; ardent Fitzroy, still fighting the battle of the despised and rejected with her banned book; or the sleeker, yet equally abundant locks of Ernest the Jew, who, in order to find a less incongruous background for his conscience, was seeking admission to the Society of Friends; Kit, who to his own great fury had been exempted from military service on medical instead of conscientious grounds; or George, who despised them all because he had the honour of serving in the Bomb Shop itself. Why these young people should have chosen Proudlock's Café for their meeting-place and debating-ground had never been explained; no doubt its closeness to the Bomb Shop had begun the frequentation, and its cheapness, combined with the motherly interest of the Misses Proudlock in everything to do with them except their politics, had turned an experiment into a habit.

Myra sat down at a table in a corner and ordered lentil cutlets. Her first impulse had been to go somewhere where the food was a little more substantial, for Proudlock's did not cater for dinners in the ordinary way. But she shrank from the idea of throwing herself back into the turmoil of London's war-nights. She would either have to go to some expensive place, where she would be conspicuously alone among escorted women, or sit at some crowded table of a popular café, holding her own with great difficulty against crowds of over-friendly males. Here she could eat cheaply, sit quietly and re-read Lawrie's last letter.

The first letter she took out of her bag was not from him but from Toby. The mistake was easy, for both looked very much alike—khaki-coloured envelope, field postmark and censor's stamp—but Toby's, she realized with a prick of compunction, had not even been opened. It had arrived just as she was leaving Monypenny Crescent and she had stuffed it into her bag, meaning to read it in the train, and then, between Kitty and the newspaper, had forgotten. She felt sorry, queerly sorry—for herself. She used to enjoy Toby's letters, to find comfort in his faithfulness and to take a deep, almost sisterly interest in his experiences. But now that savour was gone from life, another part of her kingdom had been swallowed up by the invader who had taken everything from her and given her nothing but scattered ecstasies at his will. When Lawrie was away from her—and he was almost always away—the whole of life hung tired and drooping like a flag on a windless day. She had to force herself to take an interest in things that used to delight her. Her work had always been mechanical, and so was a relief, but her holidays, her recreations, all the small pride and fun of life were gone, destroyed by a force that she herself had rashly and ignorantly set in motion.

She opened Toby's letter and read it through—decency compelled her to do so before reading the letter she already knew by heart. It was a long one. He had much to tell her about his leave in Paris, where he had spent some blameless hours among things new and surprising to him, which he felt must be equally new and surprising to her. His letter was much longer than Lawrie's; but then Lawrie's letters had been growing shorter for some time, with ever wilder and wilder handwriting, as if he could not settle down to the task of writing to her—as Toby told her he was settling down, at night, in his dug-out, "with only a few fireworks popping across the way."

His batman had made him a very good writing-desk out of some cases: "he used to be a carpenter in Lewes. . . ." He told her a lot about his batman, whom he shared with two other officers; he seemed unable to get over the interest and surprise of him. Whereas Lawrie never mentioned his; perhaps he took him for granted, never having been brought up, like Toby, to wait on himself. Lawrie had written in his last letter, "I dreamed last night that you were a witch and had put out my eyes with a piece of glass." She shuddered; that was not the way she wanted Lawrie to dream of her, as if she were an enemy. Did he, after all, look upon her as an enemy, the enemy of the future he might never live to see?

Holding the two letters in her hand she could not help comparing their writers. They both loved her; they were both away from her, exposed to dangers which must have shown them many times over that though they had been lucky until now there were heavy chances against their ever seeing her again. Toby never spoke of these chances, but she knew that he still would like to marry her if only she would have him, regardless of any future. His early caution had not survived his growing love. If the end of the war saw them with nothing to live on but his share of Ellenwhorne, that was a risk he would take rather than lose her entirely.

Lawrie, on the other hand, saw nothing but the odds against him; indeed he had won her in the first place by his enlargement of them. Yet Lawrie, who, to judge by his own statements, saw as little chance of a final home-coming as any soldier in a poem by Siegfried Sassoon, and could have married her any day he chose, as he well knew, was afraid of her because she might mean the end or at least the curtailment of his ambitions for Bewbush, for the life he had planned for days he was always proclaiming he did not expect to see.

Her heart beat fast and her throat tightened every time she thought of Lawrie, but there were moments when her head held a queer coldness towards him. He had all her love, but not her faith, and sometimes she felt painfully conscious of the gift she had offered and he had refused. Tonight at Proudlock's, sipping her coffee and watching the smoke of her cigarette drift up to the false antiquity of the ceiling, her mind wandered back from his last letter to his first.

It had been written in answer to her own first letter to him, and she could feel her whole body blush as she thought of that letter. It

seemed incredible that she should ever have written it, exposed herself so nakedly. How ignorant and foolish she seemed to herself now, only eight months older! She had thought that he meant to marry her, that the night they had spent together at the little inn at Offham constituted a proposal of marriage—the same mistake that a Victorian maiden might have made about a kiss. His delight in her, his boastings of possession—“You’re mine, now, lovely, mine always”—his crowning her queen of his life above every other woman in it—“Oh, what a difference it would have made if I had known that you were coming!” . . . all this had seemed to proclaim that love had shaken him out of his schemes for a rich marriage, that he would alter his plans and sort out his ambitions in deference to the new power that had taken command of him.

So finding herself alone, suddenly stripped of his presence so that she shuddered in a new cold, and felt faint and sick as if she had lost a limb, she had sat down to write him a letter, to tell him how her love was following him, and at the same time haunting the place he—they both—had left behind (Do you remember—that smell of roses in the morning?) . . . and yet again running on ahead to greet them both at the end of the war at Pyramus Farm, “for that’s where we must live, my darling. I’ll tell you now that when I first saw it I felt it would be our home . . .”

What a letter for a woman like herself to have written—a woman who thought herself modern and worldly-wise! It was the sort of letter Sibylla might have written. Intense . . . it had been intense; Kitty had said that Sibylla was intense and suggested that she had frightened away a lover by her intenseness. Well, her intelligent, sophisticated younger sister had done the same, or rather she had not frightened him away but forced him to declare with more abruptness than he might otherwise have done his fixed determination not to marry her.

“Myra, my sweet, my sweet, what are you thinking of? I told you right at the start that we could never be married. I don’t belong to myself in that way. I’m broke, my sweetest, and can only afford to marry money, by which I mean not somebody just with money of her own, but somebody who stinks of it. If I come through this alive I shall have to find her, and pretty quick too, or Bewbush will come under the hammer, which simply mustn’t happen. My father depended on me, before he died, to save it from that and to make

it again what once it used to be. Don't think me an old-fashioned fool for writing like this. There's something of religion in it—the only religion I know. Myra, if you'd ever owned land, however small a piece, you'd understand me; I believe that you're wise and sympathetic enough to understand me as things are.

"And I'll never forget, my dear, that you were willing to marry me, that you loved me enough for that. Oh, how I love you for that mistake, and I hope you don't love me any less because it was a mistake! Oh, Myra, don't say that you're through with me because you expected something more than I am able to give you. Though we can't marry, I promise to love you faithfully for as long as you'll love me. I don't go about doing this sort of thing, and no woman—I tell you solemnly, no woman—has moved and delighted me as you have done, my beautiful sweet. So let's sign an agreement with each other—I, Lawrence Buckrose, of Bewbush Manor, also of Crowlink Farm, Haneholt's Farm, Lordaine Farm and Pyramus Farm, all in the county of Sussex, promise to entertain no feeling stronger than friendship for any woman on earth except Myra Landless of 116 Hickory Mansions, St. John's Wood; and Winter Land Cottage, Copstreet, Sussex. In consideration of which she will entertain no stronger feelings for any other man she may meet and undertakes to spend my leaves with me exclusively, I undertaking on my side to let none of the said leaves sink below the standard of the night of August the 9th, 1916."

She could recall almost every word of that letter—which the cold critic in her brain occasionally showed her as nearly as foolish as her own; they had been branded on her memory by shame and anger. She had been ashamed of herself and angry with him. Why shouldn't he marry her? She was not the sort of girl one does not marry, even if one happens to be "county" and own an estate of two thousand acres. For half an hour she had not been Myra Landless, author of *Palace People* and *Lost in Arden*, but the Colonel's daughter—shocked, insulted, outraged by ungentlemanly behaviour. Later on the focus of her anger changed and became herself. She had made an almighty fool of herself and shown her ignorance equally of mankind at large and that small, snooty section of it known as "county." Poor sentimental sister, she had thought that if he loved her he must marry her, in spite of all present obstacles and previous resolutions;

stuffy little citizen of Marlingate, she had thought the Squire too much the gentleman to have an unmarried mistress of his own class.

Then her double anger had cooled and all she thought of was their need of each other. After all, in a war like this, there was probably no future, and love was as long as marriage—till death do us part. Coached partly by his letters—as she realized now in her clearer thoughts—partly by her own remorse for her reaction against him, she came to see herself as mercenary in wanting marriage. Here was a man who spent his days in misery, dirt and danger, for the sake of her and the things they both loved; it was not for her to think of what he could or could not give her, but herself to give him all she had and was.

This had still been her attitude when he came back to England in January on his first leave. Apart from a couple of nights he had felt bound to spend with his sister, he had given the whole of it to her, and she had taken the leave owed her by the War Office, which she had deliberately forgone till then. They had spent most of their time in London, hidden away together in the great, dark city, Captain and Mrs. Buckrose, two strangers unknown and uninteresting to the little hotel near Regent's Park where they spent their nights. By day they had made one or two trips into the country, but only once to Bewbush, for it would not be expedient for them to be seen too often down there together.

So when they left London for the last week-end they had not gone to the place they both loved best, where her own little cottage still stood empty, but to Cornwall, where they told each other the weather would be warmer and they would be more free. She had been desperately happy for a couple of days, forgetting both who she was and what she wanted, till the darkness of separation closed on her again, and she woke suddenly into a world which had lost its savour, its meaning and its end.

He had stamped his image on her, so that she bore the imprint of all the thoughts, attachments and desires of a mind profoundly different from her own. There had been no escape back into her own integrity, though she had not seen him since. He wrote wildly and casually, seeming sometimes to forget her, sometimes to cherish her more than anything on earth. She lived only for his letters, for his next leave—remembering sometimes, as one remembers the joys of

a lost childhood, all the pleasures she used to find in other things and other people.

She had paid her bill and gone out into the street, meaning to win her night's rest with a long walk home. The spring darkness had fallen over the city, a curtain spread above the street-lamps with their dimmed, down-flung light, through which unknown men and women moved mysteriously, like figures on a half-lighted stage. The streets were full of people, moving, drifting, singly and in groups—masses that spread over into the roadway, where there was little traffic beyond the motor 'buses, glowing like embers as they glided down Haymarket, through the perpetually moving crowds. The voices and footsteps of the people were louder than the rumble of the 'buses; the whole effect was rather like that of a sea, murmuring with a note of distant thunder in its voice.

She walked on, feeling released into a sort of dream. Every now and then a single pair of footsteps drew even with her and passed; then a face, pale in the shaded lamplight, would look round from under a soldier's cap. Sometimes a voice would say, You look very lonely (the accent varying with the British Empire), and she would say, Thank you—I'm not at all lonely. Then, apologetically, angrily, dejectedly, or indifferently, as might be, they passed on. She felt sorry for them, for she knew that the loneliness they saw in her was a reflection of their own. How derelict these boys from Canada, New Zealand, Anglesey, Ulster or the Hebrides, must feel in this ocean of half-lit London, how deeply in need of a woman either to love or laugh with. She did not think that all of them took her for a tart, though no doubt many had hopes that she was at least an amateur. She looked decorous enough in her coat and skirt and small cloche hat, beneath which her mouth showed unreddened, for she had not yet put on the make-up she had discarded before going down to Marlingate. But you never knew now, of course; times had changed, the war had changed them, and naughty women sometimes looked like mice—possibly in challenge to the painted faces and silken ankles of the suburbs prowling to spoil their game.

The dream closed round her—a mid-war night's dream of London, a broken dream of people and 'buses moving in occulted light. The air was full of murmur and shuffle of half-seen figures, of scraps and ends of talk . . . I said you've made a great mistake . . . three shillings a pound they asked me . . . we're expecting him Monday

... poor thing, I felt so sorry for her . . . somewhere near Cambrai . . . don't say that, kiddie . . . always the present participle . . . when we smoke aht that ole Kaiser . . . number fourteen it was . . . *pauvre petite* . . . make it a bob.

Her feet were taking her northward against the crowd. It was like swimming against a stream. The crowd seemed a thing-in-itself, apart from the men and women in it, which were no more than flotsam that it washed about the streets or jetsam that it cast into the doors of cinemas and theatres and pubs and Corner Houses . . . Ladies and Gentlemen, this way please . . . Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Dorothy and Lilian Gish . . . The Birth of a Nation . . . the war to end all wars . . . keep the home fires burning . . . Venn's undies . . . Blanche's letters to lonely soldiers in the *Bystander* . . . Phrynette's letters to lonely soldiers in the *Sketch* . . . dear yous . . . if you were the only girl in the world . . . the Bing Boys are here—there—everywhere . . . Bric-à-Brac . . . Delysia and Michel Morton . . . Entertainments tax . . . no-treating order . . . tea-time dances . . . Archibald Joyce's Band . . . Farewell, my Bluebell, farewell to you (no, that doesn't belong here—we daren't sing songs of parting now—it belongs to another war) . . . out of the streets at last—out of the shifting, surging, struggling chiaroscuro . . . only the moon above the tall houses and the trees—they can't black-out that lantern . . . only my own footsteps on the pavement . . . nearly home . . . shall I find a letter from him there?

## VII

THE summer of 1917 brought many changes to Marlingate, among them a return to something like the town's pre-war prosperity. Raids by a squadron of Gotha aircraft, first by day and then more terrifyingly by night, had resulted in a flight from London, and Marlingate became a refuge for those who had enough money and leisure to move to the seaside. Others, with less of both, established their families in safety, while remaining themselves in town, or enduring the hardships of war-time railway travel in order to combine attention to business with a good night's rest.

In addition to these people, the number of convalescent soldiers

had increased. The salty-sweet September air, soft yet cool, which with the sea and the sunshine had in the past given Marlingate a medical reputation as high as that of Brighton, made the town ideal for the establishment of hospitals and convalescent homes. The streets were blue with hospital uniforms; sometimes it almost seemed as if the sea had trickled into High Street or splashed a pool in the Marine Gardens. The soldiers were sick, but they were merry; they sang in the streets, and their voices, with the voices of the children playing on the beach, and the voices of the waves playing round the Gringer and Rock-a-Nore, gave the town a cheerful sound as well as a cheerful look.

The residents did not care for all this cheerfulness. The earlier mood of war depression and emptiness had suited them better, for they still felt depressed and the shops were still empty. None of these new arrivals, civil or military, was bringing anything to the old-established residents of the place—that is to say those who were not traders or shopkeepers. The money they spent only ate up the goods which should have been delivered at the area doors of New Marlingate, their faces in the streets only drew the attention of lonely hearts to the faces that were gone. Even the soldiers aroused envious feelings, for tales of how much they ate and how much they wasted spread and enlarged themselves in the drawing-rooms of Monypenny Crescent, Becket Grove and Pelham Square. Violet Faircloth professed to envy them the stew that was made in dixies on the parade and carried round to the billets in open pails.

“I made two of them stop the other day and let me look in, and believe me or not, it was best-end of the neck, such as I couldn’t get at Brazier’s if I went down on my knees.”

Even the comforts of Rye Lane were diminishing after three years of war.

“It can’t be very nice by the time it gets round to their billets,” said Sibylla. “When it’s wet they must get a lot of rain into the gravy. Besides, if it really *is* the best-end, it’s an awful waste to stew it—it might just as well be scrag.”

“That’s what I say—nothing but waste, waste, waste, good food thrown away that other people would be thankful to get. No wonder the war goes on and on—the soldiers have no inducement to stop it.”

“I expect they’d be glad to see their families again, and not have

to run the risk of being killed or maimed for life. I can't believe that they'd keep the war dragging on just because they can get good joints of mutton—especially if they only stew them."

"I never said that at all. I only said that if soldiers only had to bear the same hardships as civilians, the war might end sooner. Why, I had to pay half a crown for four eggs at Budgen's yesterday, and he had the cheek to say I was lucky to get them at any price."

"Well, I was standing outside Budgen's in a queue for three-quarters of an hour last Friday just to get a pound of margarine, and the girls were so rude—they asked me 'how many in family' and then just slapped down the stuff in front of me; and you have to give the exact money, because they haven't time to give change."

"Well, Sibylla, I think you're soft to go and stand in a queue. I wouldn't do it—I make Maria go for me, and I can't see why your two can't."

"They won't—I've asked them and they absolutely refused."

"Then I should make them go without the margarine."

"They'd leave if I did that."

"Seems to me it 'ud be a good riddance."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd ever had to do the whole work of a house like Number Four. After what I went through in July I'd stand in a queue all day if it kept the servants satisfied."

"Well, I do think you should get Myra to come home and help you. She has no business to be enjoying herself in London while you're left down here to cope with everything. She's your mother's daughter just the same as you are—and she's unmarried; her place is at home."

"She's doing war-work," defended Sibylla, flushing. "I couldn't possibly ask her to give it up."

Violet sniffed.

"She's got a job at two pounds a week—I don't call that doing war-work."

"But it's at the War Office."

"Still, if she's paid for it I don't see that she can call it war-work. War-work ought to be done for nothing."

"Then you don't consider that the soldiers are doing war-work?" Sibylla was surprised to find herself with such a repartee. But Violet had a short way with repartees.

"Don't talk nonsense, Sibylla."

Sibylla's defence of Myra was, as usual, against the force of her own opinion. In her heart she secretly agreed with Violet that her sister ought to come home. Her job at the War Office was not likely to be one that could not be done by anybody else, whereas the job awaiting her at Monypenny Crescent was essentially and exclusively one for Mrs. Landless's only other unmarried daughter.

Her mother's health had not improved; in fact it was growing steadily worse—so much worse that there were dreadful moments when Sibylla wrestled in prayer with the thought of how much happier she would be if her mother was dead. She shed many bitter tears over this infamy, but was unable to suppress entirely a picture shown by her mental cinema of herself alone and at peace in Monypenny Crescent, a similar figure to Violet Faircloth in Rye Lane, but with the added comforts of much-loved possessions and old, familiar surroundings. The voice of reason occasionally told her that there would not be enough money for her to go on living at home after her mother was dead; but reason had no shares in the mental cinema, where the production was all in the inferior hands of hope. Hope reminded her that her mother had her own small private income, and would probably bequeath it to the daughter who was neither married nor in possession of the means of livelihood. This might enable her with care and economy to live on very quietly where she was—or possibly, like Pelham Square, Monypenny Crescent might be converted into flats. The drawing-room floor, for instance . . . or the drawing-room floor combined with the floor above it to make a very cosy, sunny maisonette . . . Sibylla seldom got as far as this before penitence drew a curtain of tears across the picture.

She was so deeply ashamed of her thoughts about her mother that her thoughts about her sister Myra seemed virtuous in comparison and seldom found their way to the ear of the new Rector of St. Nicholas—a stout, sober, married man whom Sibylla had no temptation to identify either with her God or with the love of her dreams. But sometimes she felt really resentful of Myra's apparent indifference and unhelpfulness. There she was, enjoying herself in London—for though no doubt she worked hard enough, her letters were gay with theatres and cinemas—while her sister toiled at home without relief.

Not that Sibylla wanted to go away—she still clung to the familiar security that was her island in the sea of war and changing life—but she wanted small freedoms which were at present denied her by her

mother's claims. She had had to give up helping Violet at the canteen, and it was extremely difficult for her now even to accept an invitation to tea, owing to her mother's objection to being left alone. She had even been obliged once or twice to miss church on Sunday. She had occasionally thought of writing to Myra and asking her to come back, but had shrunk from doing so because she felt that such a return, to be successful, should follow her sister's offer rather than her own request. Myra must know of her burden; but she had never suggested coming back to take her share of it—not even when Number Four was entirely servantless, as it had been for a dreadful month not long ago (owing to the venality of Marlingate girls, who preferred munition factories at three pounds a week to British homes at fifteen shillings). And this summer she had not even spent her leave at home. She had gone with a War Office friend to Cornwall, saying that she must have a real change and could always come down to Marlingate for week-ends (though she hardly ever came), and Mrs. Landless had been so upset that she had cried. Owing no doubt to increasing age and weakness, she sometimes cried now, a circumstance which filled Sibylla in her present mood with the wildest terror and pity and shame.

It was a great surprise both to Sibylla and her mother when Kitty wrote to announce that she was coming to Monypenny Crescent for the following week-end. Mrs. Landless became violently excited and drove Sibylla nearly frantic with demands for the dusting and adornment of the spare bedroom and the procuring of un procurable food.

“Mother, I assure you, there isn't a pork sausage in Marlingate.”

“Have you tried Brazier's?”

“Mother, of course I have.”

“Don't talk to me like that, Sibylla. Have you tried Poole's?”

“Yes of—I mean, yes.”

“Have you tried Gallop's?”

Gallop's was an obscure shop in the Petty Passageway and Sibylla had not thought of going there.

“No, Mother; but they wouldn't have sausages if the better shops haven't.”

“On the contrary, it's the little shops in the poor streets that have the most goods. The Government's desperately afraid of the working classes, while it knows that people like us will be loyal whatever they have to go without. You'd better hurry off there at once before

they close. I'm particularly anxious that Kitty shall have sausages for breakfast on Sunday."

She would not have been so anxious if she had guessed the purpose of her daughter's visit, which was none other than to announce her intentions of divorcing Hugh. They had not been getting on together at all well, she said, for the last few years and the time had come when they both wanted their freedom; and things had better be settled quickly for the children's sake.

Mrs. Landless and Sibylla were appalled. They were totally unprepared for such a shock. It was true that they had seen nothing of Hugh since the beginning of the war, but they had put down his absence to his military duties and to the urgency their minds created for him to spend every available free moment with his wife.

"But I thought you were doing war-work in London on purpose to be near him," cried Sibylla. "That's what you *said*."

"And it was true. I hoped at the beginning that the war would help us pull our marriage together. It was some time before I found it was doing the opposite."

"And what else could it do, when you'd given up your home and sent away your children?" cried Mrs. Landless. "If you'd settled here with them, as I wanted you to, and had Hugh join you for his leaves, this would never have happened."

"Kitty!" cried Sibylla in a tragic voice, "you haven't fallen in love with somebody else? You don't want to marry somebody else? Because you can't."

Kitty's eyes narrowed and gleamed.

"Why can't I?"

"Because, whatever happens—I mean, however much you are divorced—you'll still be really married to Hugh. If you marry again you'll be living in sin—"

"Sibylla!" cried Mrs. Landless. "Don't talk like that. I'm ashamed to hear you use such expressions. If you can't talk decently, hold your tongue."

"But, Mother, the Church says—"

"I'm sure the Church doesn't say anything so improper. If that's what you think you hear in church, I'd better write to Tom."

"Oh, Mother, please!"

"I never said I was going to marry again," Kitty's quiet voice cut into their altercation like a little knife. "It'll be three or four months

at least before the case comes on, and then another six months till the decree nisi. There's no good even thinking about marriage before that."

"Nor after it," cried Mrs. Landless, her hostility switching from Sibylla to a less accustomed target. "I demand, Kitty, that you drop this matter at once. I'm shocked at you for behaving in such a way to one of our gallant soldiers who are fighting out there in France for us in all the mud and blood."

"You used to say they enjoyed it," said Kitty mischievously.

"And so they do. I mean, they're pleased and proud to fight for us all at home; so it's disgraceful for anyone to go behind their backs with divorce proceedings, when their minds are full of other things. It's doing what the Germans are doing—attacking them in the rear."

"I hope the Germans aren't doing that to any marked extent," said Kitty. "And anyway, Mother, Hugh wants the divorce as much as I do."

"I don't believe it."

This remained her attitude for the rest of the day. In the evening she demanded that Myra should be sent for. "I must have someone to help me in this—someone with some sense. Ring her up, Sibylla, and tell her to come down by the eight-fifty tomorrow."

"Oh, Mother . . ."

It was the first time Sibylla had heard her mother credit Myra with any sense, and she could not fail to see the reflection on her own efforts as a counsellor. But her protest was due almost entirely to her reluctance to struggle with the long-distance telephone, as she was more than usually susceptible to mechanical frustrations.

"Oh, Mother . . . must I? I mean, where can I ring her up from as late as this? It isn't as if we had a telephone in the house. Wouldn't it do if I sent a telegram?"

"No, it would not. We shouldn't get an answer till tomorrow morning, and I want her room got ready today. It's only six o'clock—you can telephone from the post-office if you go at once."

So Sibylla spent half an hour struggling with Trunks, and was almost in tears when a very distant and almost inaudible voice proclaimed itself to be Myra Landless Speaking. The voice did not sound too pleased at being asked to come down to Marlingate the next morning, but Sibylla, who dared not go back to Monypenny Crescent with

an unfavourable answer and was by this time feeling quite angry with Myra for her remoteness, persevered.

"You must come, Myra. It's most urgent, and Mother isn't at all well."

"I suppose Kitty's told her about the divorce."

"Oh, hush!" cried Sibylla, most unnecessarily, for the voice was so faint that it scarcely reached her own ears. "But you must come," she repeated.

"But I'm supposed to be at the office tomorrow. It's my Sunday on."

"Can't you ring up and say you've had to leave town on urgent family affairs?"

"I suppose I could—I suppose I could change over to next Sunday."

"Yes, please do that."

The voice agreed, but not very willingly—in fact, if it had not been so faint and far away, Sibylla would have said that she had heard it sigh.

Myra certainly did not want to come down to Marlingate. Not only did she feel reluctant to involve herself in a family row, but she shrank from the struggle and strain of the visit—from the early start, the crowded railway journey, the discomforts of home, from an enterprise, in fact, which would fill her mind and body with new pains, without in any way diminishing the old ones.

She could not, however, refuse the urgency of Sibylla's plea, and it would be better to go now than later . . . she shivered, as once again she felt the hardness and coldness of the rock of time. Every day, every hour, every minute that passed was now inexorable, demanding both her careful planning and her instant decision. She had never before had such nightmare consciousness of time as reality—a consciousness that simultaneously she felt to be due to some monstrous deception of her mind and will. All her life now seemed pinned to the little watch on her wrist, ticking on and on to the time when she would have to face her destiny with some catastrophic act either of courage or humiliation. Life seemed now a mechanical thing—mechanical changes measured by a mechanical rule, no place for mind or spirit, power or prayer.

One mercy, however, was that this Sunday morning she had got over her bout of sickness before it was time to start for the train. She

had waked into it at six o'clock, and was through it about half an hour earlier than usual. She had been able to dress with a minimum of discomfort and, though she could eat no breakfast, had enjoyed a cup of tea at the station.

The third-class carriage was crowded—people were even standing down the middle. A baby and a suitcase overflowed on to Myra from either side, and the standing soldier in front of her leaned against her knees with a heaviness which she felt was only half involuntary. Every now and then when she lifted her eyes they met his, grey, narrow, darkly fringed, fixed upon her face in a sort of mocking intentness. She gave him no response—was not even aware that he wanted any; he had become a part of her journey as she had become a part of his.

The dusty sunshine filled the carriage, combining with her neighbours' warmth to stupefy her into a sort of doze. She was awake, aware of her surroundings, but with her thoughts lying stagnant in her mind, presenting their familiar situation without any movement of feeling.

It now did not seem to matter that she was going to have Lawrie's child. Her thoughts merely showed her the events that had confirmed her fears into certainties. She saw herself going up the steps of the doctor's house in Ealing—she had chosen him almost at random out of the telephone book, to avoid her two sets of surroundings in town and country. She heard the bell ring . . . but all her thoughts still held of the consultation was the engraving of Frith's "Margate Beach" on the wall of the old-fashioned surgery, and a sudden glimpse on her finger of the wedding-ring that Lawrie had bought her on his first leave . . . "Good-bye, and thank you. . . . No, I'm afraid I shan't be able to call again . . . I'm going North tomorrow to join my husband. . . . Yes, it will be good news for him, won't it?" She did not even feel amused when she thought of those parting words.

Ever since then she had been asking herself one question: "What shall I do?" The question stood up before her dozing mind like the trunk of a tree, forking into two branches. One branch asked, "Shall I tell Lawrie?" and then split off into "Shall I persuade him to marry me?" and "Shall I let him persuade me to get rid of the child?" The other branch asked, "What can I do if I don't tell Lawrie?" and subdivided into "Shall I marry Toby Street?" "Shall I pretend I'm married to a man who's been killed in France and act an impossible part

for the rest of my life?" and "Shall I face the world (and Mother) as a woman with the courage of her misdeeds?"

The tree was of rather lopsided growth, for only one side of the fork was really spreading. The "Shall I tell Lawrie?" side of it seemed already to have begun to wither. If all this had happened six months ago she might have told him; she might even have rejoiced at such an unexpected forcing of the situation. She loved him—he loved her; surely it could be no bad thing for them to marry, even under pressure of circumstances. But since then had come Trearnion and their quarrel; something had changed—something was lost. Their love already had an element of disappointment in it—he knew now that she was disappointed in him and she knew that he was disappointed in her because she was disappointed in him.

She could see them—in her half-doze—facing each other in a seascape of turquoise, opal and sapphire, on sands pale and smooth as pearl, with the seamed, volcanic rocks around them, breaking into the sunny smoothness of the shore like anger breaking into love. . . .

"I told you all this at the beginning, sweet. If you didn't believe me, why did you pretend you did?"

(Was that the wind or the wheels at the back of his voice?)

"I never pretended—I just accepted."

"Then why don't you accept any longer?"

"Because I love you too much."

"But, Myra, this has nothing to do with love. I should have thought you'd understand. . . . I love you—I shall always love you. Even if the day should come when I've been married for years and have all the children I want, you'll still be first with me, as you are now. Why can't you feel the same? Why do women never seem able to realize the importance of love except as a preliminary to marriage?"

"Because most women think that if a man doesn't marry them when he's free to do so, it's because he doesn't really love them."

"But I'm *not* free to marry you. Oh, Myra, must I explain everything all over again?"

"No—for God's sake!"

Tears had filled her throat and invaded the quarrel. She felt ashamed of herself. But she had already lost her dignity by the very nature of the argument. She had never meant it to begin, but an incautious word had started it, and now she was floundering in it

deeply, ragging and raging at the man she loved because he would not marry her, the Colonel's daughter.

He had looked at her reproachfully.

"My dear, I'd no idea you saw things in that way—I thought you were a different sort of person."

"I'm a normal woman, who wants what happiness she can get in this beastly world, and doesn't see why she should be sacrificed to a future that may never come. You're going back to France. . . . Why can't we both take all the happiness we can find in things as they are now?"

"But that's just what we *are* doing. However much married we were, we couldn't do more than spend my leaves together."

"But we should have something more to look forward to afterwards—our life together after the war."

"My child, I've already told you. If there's an after-the-war at all for us, we'll be together in it. This isn't just a temporary affair like my commission. I shall always love you and want you. I've told you already—it doesn't matter whom I marry; you will always come first. I'm not a domesticated sort of man, and my marriage will probably only be politics. You'll be life."

But she was too angry, with herself as well as with him, to be soothed by any words. All she saw in these was their affront.

"So till the end of my days I've got to go about hiding and pretending? Don't you realize how I hate all this secrecy?—how much I want to be open and honest—"

"And respectable"—he was annoyed because he had not appeased her.

"Yes, respectable. Why should I be ashamed of wanting to be respectable? I'm a respectable woman—not a tart."

"I should never have fallen in love with you if I thought you were."

"Perhaps not—but you seem to require a substitute."

The memory of those words woke her right out of her doze, and she met the eyes of the unknown soldier with a look of shock and repentance, as if they had been Lawrie's.

How, after those words, could she possibly tell him that she was going to have his child, show him baited the oldest trap in the world for the unwilling male? The quarrel on the sands had burned itself out; she had cried and their love had built a new nest out of reconciliation. But they had both lost their defences of pride; and were

doomed to the next storm. Now she felt sure that he did not love her enough to marry her, that his plans and dreams for the future were only an unconscious attempt to glorify a situation which otherwise he would have been fastidious and moral enough to despise. No doubt he had his ambitions, his schemes for the restoration of his estate, but they could hardly be so urgent and overwhelming as to warrant the sacrifice of a woman he loved as a man should love his wife. It was only because his love for her was secondary—temporary, in spite of his denials—that he could thus defer to shadows. . . . If she forced, or attempted to force, a marriage in these circumstances it would mean nothing but humiliation and disaster. No, whatever happened, she could not go to Lawrie. She had lost him, whether she married him or not. . . .

Her thoughts were alive now and hurting her. Some of the pain must have shown itself in her eyes, for she seemed to see an answering pain in the eyes looking down into hers. For the first time he spoke.

“Tired?” he asked her.

“A little; but”—she forced herself to smile—“we’re nearly there.”

He left the train a station before she did.

There was little chance of forgetting her troubles in the troubles of her family. All this time she listened to her mother’s lamentations over Kitty’s divorce she could not help thinking what an infinitely worse convulsion her own story would bring about. In comparison with hers, Kitty’s affair was normal and respectable; and on these lines she tried to reassure her mother, though with rather a bad grace. She still felt resentful of having been dragged down to Marlingate—for no useful purpose that she could see, since it was impossible either that she should reconcile her mother to the situation or persuade Kitty to change it. She could not even help her sister with a rosy account of Howard Lintine, for Kitty had met her at the station on purpose to tell her not to mention him.

“They’d never swallow him now. Mother would loathe and despise him for not being in the army, and Sibylla has already announced that if I marry again I’ll be living in sin.”

On the whole, Myra was relieved not to have the responsibility of commanding him; for though she would have done her best, he had not impressed her favourably at the meeting her sister had

arranged. He seemed to her a pretty common type of sensual, selfish male, though intelligent and good-looking in a curious way—red hair with Jewish features. Kitty could not have chosen a second husband more utterly unlike the first, which Myra could understand but which would not make her mother like him any better.

There really seemed very little that she could do, and her one desire was to go back to town as soon as possible and restore herself with at least some physical rest for the business of the next day. But Mrs. Landless, having failed to persuade her to stay the night, had begged her so urgently to stay till the last train that she had not liked to refuse. She was beginning to feel desperately sorry for her mother, so old in the midst of so much change and doom. She felt more sorry for her now than she felt for Sibylla. Sibylla was growing very tiresome and irritating—it could not be much more fun for her mother to live with Sibylla than for Sibylla to live with her mother. What a muddle and a misery it all was! . . . and the worst was still to come. Myra felt her spine shiver as for a dreadful moment she saw herself with her mother's eyes.

One of her alternatives was gone—she certainly was not going to face the world as a woman with the courage of her sins—and when that afternoon she lay on the bed in her old room (taking refuge there while Mrs. Landless lay down for her usual after-luncheon rest) she saw that another must be finally discarded.

It now seemed to her a mere useless humiliation to tell Lawrie. He had had his leave only two months ago; he would not be having it again for at least another four, and then it would be too late to do more than legitimize the child. That would not spare her family much. Of course he might be able to get compassionate leave if he made the situation known; but her stomach turned at the mere thought of asking him to apply for it. Besides, with such an obstacle ready-made he would probably fail her.

If she married anyone in a hurry it would have to be Toby Street. Toby was due for his leave any time now—he might be even at this very moment at Ellenwhorne and would certainly marry her at once if she let him know that she had changed her mind. But could she really bring herself to take advantage of him like that? She could not tell him the truth and her heart shrank in shame from the thought of making him party to a lie. He was too fine, too good to be made the victim of her opportunism. Lawrie had called him righteous . . .

but Lawrie had never understood integrity. Of course if she married Toby he need never know that he had fathered another man's child. For certainly he would never suspect her. He knew nothing about her, really. He thought her good and honest and unselfish like himself. Oh, Toby, Toby! . . . A nostalgia for him seized her, which, had the moment been less austere in its reproach, she might have deceived herself was the beginning of love. Oh, Toby, Toby . . . if only I could love you—or rather, if only I could have loved you three years ago! . . . With an effort she put Toby out of her calculations.

What should she do, then? Should she tell Kitty, ask her advice and see what she could do? Perhaps Howard Lintine would help? . . . She shuddered at the thought, but she must have money if she was to go away and get the thing over at a distance, which now seemed the only course left her. On the other hand, Kitty might not like telling Howard, letting him know he had married into a such a family. In a sudden reaction Myra felt that she would rather do anything than tell Kitty . . . but the problem was she had no one else who could possibly help or advise her. She had made no close friends among the girls and women at the War Office, her former school-friends were all far too respectable to be consulted, while her friends at Proudflock's and the Bomb Shop would probably tell her she was making a fuss about nothing and it would do her mother all the good in the world to have a little bastard for a grandchild.

She twisted on her bed in a return of all her old confusion. If only she could sleep, she might be able to rest her mind and re-form her ideas on waking. But sleep seemed further than the sun from that room where she had slept for so many years. Lying now on her back, with her hands clasped under her head, her eyes fixed on the boughs of the ash-tree fluttering and curtsying at the window, she saw in her mind the room as it had been her nursery and her school-room. It was easy to re-create it, as her more recent self had forsaken it while still using it and had left no mark. The very pictures had been bought with the rare money of her school-days; sepia prints of Watts's "Sir Galahad" and Rossetti's "Beata Beatrix," Bougereau's "Notre Dame des Anges" crystallizing the religious impulses that had hovered round her Confirmation. In the corner still stood the nursery screen which had kept the draught off Rose as she sat and sewed.

Rose . . . her memory rushed into the present hour with painful relevance. She could still feel the pain and mystery of Rose's departure.

How prim and purse-mouthed everyone had been—even Kitty. Opinion had softened since then—there was now quite a lot of kind talk and helpful work on the subject of Unmarried Mothers—but no one had yet found an easier solution for Rose's problem than Rose. She rolled over toward the pillow with an uneasy squawk of hysteria when she thought how impossible it would be for her to solve her own problem on such simple family lines.

Her family! Her poor, prim, old-fashioned family! For most of her adult life she had forsaken them, she had despised them and ignored their wishes; but at this moment the worst part of her suffering seemed the thought of their inevitable share in it, of the grief and shame she would bring into lives already none too gay. Her mother had never understood her, had always nagged her and lately had exasperated her beyond belief; but who could not help feeling sorry for her now, left in her old age to camp as best she could among the ruins of her fallen world? Sibylla was priggish and foolish and distressed one's conscience by her loyalty to what one had abandoned; but she too woke pity almost to heart-break with her look as of a once lovely thing imprisoned—as of a woodland tree shut up to wither in a small town garden.

And now they must be sunk altogether out of what comfort they still possessed in pride and respectability, made outcasts even in their own dreary little world. On the top of their agitation over Kitty's divorce must come this blow, so infinitely heavier and more shameful—something they doubtless thought could never happen in a Colonel's family . . . a housemaid's tragedy! . . .

She felt at that moment as if she would do, pay, endure anything that would keep her suffering to herself, shut it up in her own life without leak or overflow. But what could she do? It seemed that no matter what she did, it was always the wrong thing. She had done the wrong thing about Lawrie in the first place—and in the second place and in the third. She was always wrong. She did not know how to live. That was what had always been the matter with her—in spite of her gifts and cleverness, she did not know how to live . . . and now she had come this ghastly cropper which would break not only her own bones but the bones of her unhappy family. The tears oozed from under her closed eyes; and then suddenly she sprang up, dashing them away, startled by a knock at the door.

"Who is it?—come in."

Sybilla came in.

"I'm sorry—I'm afraid I've woken you up. But somebody's come to see you."

"Oh, damn it! Who?"

"Young Street—I didn't know he was a Major."

"Toby Street? . . ."

She felt as if something had hit her chest—it must have been her heart.

"Yes; he said he came back on leave yesterday, and he rang you up this morning, and the porter or somebody told him you'd come down here. Would you like me to get rid of him for you?"

"No . . . I'll come. I won't be a moment—I've just got to tidy myself."

"How long has he been a Major?"

"Only a few weeks."

"Well, do ask him to stay to tea. It'll do Mother good to see him—she always likes talking to officers."

"All right. You can ask him yourself if you like. Tell him I won't be a moment."

She went to the mirror and did her best with her face and hair. Her hand was trembling so that she could hardly hold the comb.

Toby Street stayed to tea, or rather he came back to tea after a walk with Myra on All Holland Hill. Sibylla was annoyed because they were late, and her mother had begun to fuss and fidget and declare alternately that she would not have the scones toasted till they came and that she wanted her tea at once and would not wait for them.

Sibylla herself was fussed, for she wanted a private talk with Myra, and now it did not seem possible. Young Street would probably stay till the last moment—indeed he might go and see her off at the station. Yet it seemed essential that she should talk to Myra and tell her that she really must come home and help look after her mother. . . . Why, last Sunday I wasn't even able to get to Church. . . . I went this morning because Kitty was here and stayed at home with Mother, but next week I shan't be able to go and I *did* so want to see the new altar dedicated. . . . If Myra was at home she wouldn't want to go to church, so I could go every Sunday, and in return I'd stay at home so that she could go out to Winter Land for a couple of days if she wanted to. . . . We'd take turns about going out to

tea. . . . No, I don't suppose she'd ever want to go out to tea in Marlingate, but I expect she'd like to go to the cinema. . . . Anyhow, I think it really is her duty to come home, especially with Mother so upset about Kitty. . . . Is that them coming up the steps? . . . Yes, I can see her hat—I must rush and tell Emmy to put those scones in the oven at once.

Myra and Toby came in, glowing after their walk and apparently in good spirits, though Toby was very quiet. Myra looked perhaps less happy, but she was full of animation, almost of excitement, whereas during the early part of the day she had looked tired and dejected. Sibylla wondered for the first time if they were in love.

Mrs. Landless made a great fuss over Toby, would scarcely let anyone else talk to him and plied him with food.

"Why have you never been to see us before?" she asked.

He mumbled something about very seldom getting leave.

"I know why you didn't come," wagged the old lady. "It was because Myra wasn't here. She's a naughty girl and won't stop at home. Why don't you tell her that it's her duty to stay at home with her mother instead of gadding about in London, pretending she's doing war-work?"

Sibylla felt herself growing hot all over. She blushed for her sister's sake, feeling convinced that she must share with her the humiliation of her mother's occasional bouts of archness, which had recently become her reaction to the attentive male. Thus in her girlhood she had coquettled, and now at the term of her years would coquette again, as the stimulus of youth revived with its enlarged memory. Sibylla watched her sister's face for a crimson matching her own, but saw instead an expressive look thrown at Toby, who then became the one to be incarnadined.

He cleared his throat.

"I wonder, Mrs. Landless . . . I mean, since you've said such nice things about me . . . and of course I'd rather too that Myra wasn't grinding away in that office . . . she ought to have a home of her own . . . I mean—"

He broke off, blushing more furiously than ever, and Myra said:

"Let me tell them, Toby dear. Mother, Toby has asked me to marry him, and I've accepted."

"Oh!"

The exclamation came from Sibylla. She had measured the length

of the affair by her own conjecture that they were falling in love, and their engagement seemed almost indecently hurried.

"Best congratulations," said Kitty smoothly.

"I hope it isn't too much of a shock to everyone," said Toby, finding more effective speech. "Myra and I have known each other since we were kids, but I've naturally seen very much more of her than I have of the rest of you—I mean, she's stayed with us at Ellenwhorne such a lot and lately she's had Winter Land Cottage . . ."

"Ah!" cried Mrs. Landless. "Now I know why she was so set on having that cottage."

"I didn't—" began Myra, then suddenly changed to, "But you're pleased, aren't you, Mother? You haven't seen much of Toby, but you've told me several times that you like him. Now you must like him even more."

"Yes, of course I like him. He's a brave soldier—a brave officer. I'm always glad for officers to marry good wives—I mean women who'll stand by them through thick and thin, for better for worse."

She looked at Kitty while she spoke.

"Shall you get married at the end of the war?" asked Sibylla.

"Oh, before then, I hope," said Toby.

"Yes, of course—they must have a military wedding," cried Mrs. Landless, who was growing more and more excited. "Toby can easily find one of his officers to be best man, and the regiment must provide a guard of honour. I'll write to Tom and ask him to perform the ceremony, with the regimental padre to assist, of course. The question is, shall it be at All Hallows' or St. Nicholas'? Tom might prefer St. Nicholas', but we've always attended All Hallows', and both Kitty and Georgie were married there. Kitty's was a military wedding, though she only married a captain. Myra will be marrying a major."

"Only a temporary major, I'm afraid," said Toby.

"Oh, but you must join the regular Army when the war's over. You won't want to go back to civilian life, especially farming, after you've met so many nice Army people. You must go into the regulars and live at Aldershot. I'm sure you'll both enjoy the life there, and later you might get sent out to India, which would be very gay for Myra—"

She rattled on, no one quite equal to stopping her, till finally she carried off her prospective son-in-law to her husband's study, where

she said she would show him some photographs of Indian army life. The three sisters were left alone.

"Congratulations, Myra," said Kitty, smiling. "You couldn't have done it at a more opportune moment. This will take Mother's mind right off me and my iniquities."

"I hope it will. You like him, don't you?"

"Very much. But I'm surprised—I'd no idea he was anything but a friend, almost a sort of brother. I suppose he's your reason for turning down Lawrie Buckrose?"

"Yes," said Myra, smiling sweetly.

She was now more anxious than ever to be back in London. She must write to Lawrie tonight and then forget him, otherwise her mind was cleft and the pain of living too great. She had been obliged to be formally on with the new love before she was formally off with the old, but that last formality must be completed without delay. She did not want Lawrie to hear of her marriage through any rumour or public channel—he would be hurt and afflicted enough as it was. Her conduct would seem to him outrageous in its treachery and nothing would induce her to explain it. No, it would be all to the good if he were made so angry that he never wrote to her or attempted to speak to her again. He would hate her, probably—and from his knowledge, deservedly. The man she had loved so much—whom in a dreadful, dying way she still loved—would loathe and despise her for ever. That was the price she must pay for a year of doubtful happiness.

"Myra," Sibylla was saying, "don't you think you might come and live at home until your wedding? I don't want to bother you, but I hardly suppose you'll want to go on working at the War Office after you're married, so it wouldn't matter very much if you gave up now and came to help me here. I mean, I feel I simply can't go through the preparations for another wedding without any help. Georgie helped of course, as much as she could, but this time I'll be quite alone, and—"

"It's all right, Sibylla; there won't be any preparations. I couldn't say anything to Mother, as she seemed so set on having a shout, but Toby and I both want to get married before he goes back to France. It *can* be done, as I believe there are special arrangements for soldiers who want to marry while on leave. So we'll probably be married quietly in London in about a week."

Sibylla looked startled, but Kitty said:

"Much the most sensible thing. You've known each other for ages, so there's no reason to wait any longer; and I really don't think Mother's equal to another posh wedding."

"She'll be dreadfully disappointed," said Sibylla solemnly.

"I dare say she will," said Kitty, "but it can't be helped. I don't see how she could possibly manage a big show at such short notice, and in times like this you can't ask people to wait. I think the best thing to do would be to let her rip for the present and then tell her when it's all over. Otherwise she's sure to put up a fight, and it's bad for her to get excited the way she's doing now."

"What'll you do after you're married?" Sibylla asked. "I mean, where will you live? Surely you could come home then for a bit? I mean, things are so difficult . . ."

"Toby wants me to live at Winter Land Cottage till the end of the war, so that he can come there whenever he gets leave and be near his people too. But I can come and stay at Monypenny Crescent when he's away."

She would hate it, but it was the least that she could do, and it would not be for long. Soon she would have to be making a display of the symptoms of pregnancy . . . not that that would help her much. Her mother would be all the more anxious to keep her at home; she would probably want the child to be born under her roof. But Sibylla would not be so pleased to have her in the house—giving trouble and making more work for the servants. . . . She had not yet come to stay in Monypenny Crescent, but already she was making plans for leaving it.

"As far as I'm concerned," Kitty was saying, "the more Mother has of you and Toby the better it will be for me. I don't think that at present her mind holds more than one idea at a time, so I hope that finding a soldier son-in-law will make her forget the one she's losing."

"Hush!—here they are coming back," said Sibylla.

Mrs. Landless and Toby came into the room, having completed the inspection of the photographs and given and received some hideous snapshots of Myra at the age of eight, which she had hoped were long ago lost or thrown away.

"You were very like that when we first met each other," said Toby. "I can remember opening the door to you at Ellenwhorne and seeing you standing on the doorstep in a scarlet tam-o'-shanter."

"Yes, I can remember that day. I was a horrid kid. How much you must have hated me!"

"I didn't hate you at all. I think I felt sorry for you, because you were so very shy."

His eyes rested on her in a look in which love was mingled with the truest kindness, a look that made her own eyes suddenly fill with tears as she turned them away. He sat there listening to her mother's foolish talk, his fair head bent towards her in attentive courtesy; but when she looked at him again his eyes met hers with that light which had first dawned in them when, out among the tamarisks on All Holland Hill, she had told him she had "changed her mind."

A sense of his goodness and of her own unworthiness rushed over her in a desolating fire of shame. She saw herself in that consuming moment as a treacherous, selfish creature who throughout her life had sought only her own ends and now was taking advantage of his selfless integrity to spare herself the findings of her seekings. He was good, and she had deceived him; he loved her and respected her, and she was making him the receptacle of her broken and useless love for another man.

Her mind hardened fiercely into resolution. Whatever happened, Toby must not be allowed to suffer. If she did not love him now, she must learn to love him soon—train herself, cheat herself, force herself some way to give him back all that he was giving her, so that he ran no risk of breaking his heart upon a counterfeit. She must repay him in full measure for this gift of himself. . . . "O God," she prayed—who probably never had prayed before in any strict sense of prayer—"O God, help me to love Toby—make me love him—make me be always good to him. May he never suffer for what he has done for me today!"

Sibylla knew that it was wrong to feel aggrieved by Myra's engagement, but she could not entirely weed out the nettle of resentment from her thoughts, though she tried very hard. She told herself that she not only ought not but need not be jealous. After all, her own single state was a voluntary act of reparation for the sin of her youth—or if not deliberate reparation, at least a consequence of the shame and penitence which had made her flee the society of men, or anyway be aloof and silent in their company. She could have married Philip Janaway if she had wanted to, or that Mr. Harris who had

proposed to her when she was only twenty-one. . . . She really need not be jealous of Myra for being engaged at twenty-seven, or even for having turned down another man whom Kitty said would have been much more fun to marry.

Nevertheless, she could not avoid a rankling sense of having been discriminated against in an important matter. Out of four sisters, she was the only one to remain single. What had given the others their advantages? Kitty, of course, had always been beautiful and attractive, but Georgie was definitely plain, and Myra had not much to boast of in the way of looks. Some people might admire her face, but her mouth was too large and her eyes too narrow, and as for her figure, she was woefully thin—no bust, no hips; she did not even have to wear stays. In Sibylla's youth such a girl would have been made agonizedly conscious of her deficiencies.

Yet here was Myra about to marry her own choice and at the same time to wreck all Sibylla's hopes of a helper in the difficult times to come. There were occasions when she realized that at least some of her resentment was due to the blighting of her hopes in this direction. For of course Myra would not live at home when she was married. She had said that she would come to stay in Monypenny Crescent, but it could not be for long. She would be sure to have a baby, and anyway when the war came to an end she would go away to live with her husband, leaving Sibylla to cope with a mother even more sick and difficult than she was now.

To vary her apprehension of these ultimate evils there was the immediate prospect of having to break to her mother the news of Myra's marriage, knowing that the old lady's mind was still fixed on a grand military wedding in a few months' time. Every day she talked of it, planned for it, enlarged upon it. Sibylla had been unable to prevent her writing to Tom Hardcastle and booking him for the occasion (she always made a great point of writing to the absent members of the family, who called her letters "mother's missing-word puzzles"). She would be terribly upset and angry to have the matter taken out of her hands without warning or consultation. Neither Myra nor Kitty seemed to realize how much she would feel it; and in spite of her relief at not having to prepare for a wedding in the grand style, Sibylla thought them both a little heartless.

The day came and the telegram arrived, addressed to Sibylla. This circumstance provided an opening.

"Who on earth is sending *you* telegrams?"

"It's Myra, Mother. She wants me to break the news to you."

"What news? It isn't Toby is it? . . . Sibylla, tell me at once what's happened."

"Oh, nothing bad, Mother—something rather good. Myra and Toby were married this morning in London."

"Married! However can they possibly be married?—they haven't even had their banns cried. You don't know what you're talking about. Let me see the telegram."

The telegram, however, said exactly what Myra had said: "Please tell Mother that Toby and I were married in London this morning."

The old lady's lip quivered.

"I don't understand it. How can they possibly be married? It isn't legal without a fortnight's notice."

"Things have been specially arranged for soldiers to get married quickly while on leave."

"Oh, have they? and how do you know that? I never heard anything about it. In my opinion there's something sly and underhand about all this. I don't like it at all."

"Oh, Mother, you know Toby wouldn't do anything that wasn't perfectly straightforward. You've told everyone how highly you think of him. It's only that he and Myra want to be married before he goes back to the Front. He might get killed you know."

"And what good would it do Myra to be married then? She doesn't want to be a widow, I suppose. I can't think why they've gone off and got married like that—it doesn't look well to get married in such a hurry. And it's very unfair by me. I was going to give them such a grand wedding. I'd planned for Grace Morrison's little girl to carry her train, and the two Blakes to be bridesmaids, both in pink. And they'd have walked out under an arch of swords—there'd have been photographs in the Marlingate paper. Instead of which she's been married in a hole-and-corner manner without anybody there at all. I don't like it!—I don't like it!" and to Sibylla's great distress she began to cry.

"Oh, Mother, please don't. It really is all for the best. You'd have got terribly tired if there'd been a grand wedding, and you know Doctor Miller said you weren't to have anything to tire or excite you."

She put her arm round her mother's neck, trying to comfort her, while finding something mysteriously repugnant and unnatural in

the embrace, as if it should have been reversed and she who should have clung and been comforted.

"I don't care," cried Mrs. Landless, choking with the difficult, breathless sobs of old age. "I wanted a military wedding—it's the last wedding we shall ever have in this family, and I wanted to enjoy it. I call it very heartless of Myra and Toby to get married like that, without telling me. And I wanted so much to see Toby—I wanted to see him again before he goes back to the Front."

"You shall see him, Mother. He and Myra are both coming here before he goes away. They're having just a very short honeymoon—only three days—and then they're coming down to see his people and to see you."

"How do you know?"

"They told me—they promised me they'd come."

"Then you've known about this all along—you're in the plot against me. You're a wicked, ungrateful girl, Sibylla. Go away—go away—I don't want to speak to you."

Sibylla saw that she had been unwise. With reddening cheeks she blurted:

"I'm sorry, Mother. But it was all done to help you and spare you trouble. You know there'd have been a lot for you to arrange even if I'd done all the work—"

"So it was *you* who wanted to be spared the trouble."

"No, Mother. Indeed it wasn't. I mean," as conscience crashed in with a demand for truthfulness, "I *am* glad, of course; but that wasn't why it was settled that way. You really oughtn't to have anything to upset you or make you excited. Doctor Miller particularly said you were to be kept quiet and not worried."

"But I *am* upset, I *am* worried. There's no good talking to me about Doctor Miller. He'd be shocked if he could see how upset I am—much more than if she'd had a proper wedding. Why, I'd written for patterns for my dress from Madame Boorman—I've had all that trouble for nothing. There's no good standing there, Sibylla, and telling me you've saved me trouble, because you haven't. You've *made* it—that's what you've done by all this."

"But, Mother, it isn't my fault. I mean I didn't suggest it—it was Myra's and Toby's own idea, because they wanted to be married before he went back to France."

"But you knew all about it—knew it and didn't tell me, though

you were with me all day and knew I was making my plans. You're a most ungrateful girl. You don't really love your mother or you wouldn't be so deceitful."

"Oh, darling Mother, please—"

"Go away!—go away!"

Sibylla hesitated. Her mother was in such a state that it seemed best to leave her alone till she recovered; but on the other hand, ought she to go? wasn't it her duty to stay?

"Wouldn't you like me to read to you? You know, we were going to finish *A Broken Halo* this afternoon, so that I can run down to the library and change it after tea."

In answer her mother picked up the library book and performed a gesture which was meant to hurl it at Sibylla's head, but actually sent it skimming into the fireplace behind her.

"Go away!—don't you hear me?—go away!"

Sibylla backed quickly out of the door, her breath rising and falling stormily. This was the first time her mother had thrown anything at her, and she felt angry as well as scared. She had half a mind to walk straight out of the house and not come back till Mrs. Landless had had a good fright. Then she remembered that it was Emmy's day out, and Cook had declared it no part of her duties to bring in the tea. Sibylla would have to content herself with a detached and frigid attitude till her mother apologized. For she really ought to apologize, even though she was her mother. She had been most unjust, for Sibylla was entirely blameless as far as Myra's wedding was concerned. Much as she disliked the idea of a big ceremony with all its attendant labours, she would have played her part and never even thought of suggesting this hasty, hole-in-corner affair. They had probably got married at a registrar's . . . How did she know that the marriage was valid in the eyes of the Church? She must ask Mr. Kingsley, and she hoped he would say it was all right, because she did not want to have to tackle Myra . . .

This fresh alarm occupied her mind for some time, and when she went to prepare the tea she found that a good deal of her indignation against her mother had melted away. After all, she was a very old lady, nearly eighty, and her health was far from good. She had rightly been upset by Myra's conduct, which was not good either. . . . It really was a shame to have cheated her of something that she had been so eagerly looking forward to. A sudden wave of pity for

her surged through Sibylla's heart. She remembered her in her arms, so frail and trembling, so unlike a mother, so like a child . . . a few tears fell hissing on the hot plate of the stove.

She made the tea and carried the heavy Benares tray into the drawing-room. All was peace as she opened the door. Mrs. Landless had fallen asleep in an arm-chair by the fireplace, where Mrs. Barclay's novel still lay, in a condition that made Sibylla a little anxious about its reception at the library. Putting down her laden tray she tiptoed to the fender and picked it up, to examine it more closely and see what could be done to improve its appearance before she took it back. As she did so, a clumsy movement of her arm caught the tongs and sent them clattering from their upright position beside the grate.

"Oh, Mother, I'm sorry—I didn't mean to wake you."

But her mother had not wakened. How fortunate—how strange, for the noise had been terrific. Then suddenly something in her attitude, peaceful yet rigid, caught Sibylla's eye and made her heart beat suffocatingly. With a cold, trembling sensation in her limbs, she stepped across the hearthrug and bent over the sleeping figure in the chair.

"Mother! . . ."

There was no response or motion, and with infinite reluctance Sibylla put out her hand and touched the pale cheek. Then her heart seemed to stop beating. Her mother was dead.



## PART THREE

### D R U M

• • • — — • • •

#### I

THE heat over Marlingate seemed a solid thing, compounded of sunshine and the thick blue sky that held the melting town under it like butter under a bowl. Only on the shore there was coolness, as the sea drawled over the shingle, breaking in little cold showers against the groins and scattering spray like perfume on the sand. But the shore was deserted.

There were no boats gliding on the oily-smooth blue water, no children paddling among the edging curds of foam. Even the Marine Parade and the Marine Gardens were thinly sown with people, who mostly sat uneasily on the deck-chairs, talking into one another's ears, or walked restlessly round the empty bandstand.

The liveliest part of the town was the station. The platforms were crowded, and up Station Road moved a sequence of cabs, mostly carrying heavy luggage. The scene suggested a day towards the end of September when the summer season was over and the holiday-makers were returning home, except that it was a long time since Marlingate visitors had driven in cabs or carried anything heavier than a fibre suitcase. Anyway, the season had scarcely begun, for it was the middle of June.

Standing outside Budgen's shop, nearly opposite the entrance to Station Road, Sibylla watched a private car, with a great deal of luggage in the open boot, sweep past the slower cabs and disappear round the curve.

"That's Mrs. Long," she said to Violet Faircloth.

"Oh, is it? I suppose she's going to her daughter's at Cirencester. I expect everyone will be leaving now."

"Everyone? I shan't."

"Don't you think you'll want to go and stay with Georgie or with Kitty?"

"No, I'm sure I won't."

"I expect you will when the Germans bomb the town."

Violet spoke in a superior voice and Sibylla immediately rejoined:

"Why should they bomb it? It's an open town without any air-dromes or military objectives. Why should they waste their bombs on Marlingate?"

"You said that at the beginning of the war."

"And I was right. In spite of all those A.R.P. lectures, not a single plane came near us."

"No, because they were much too far away in Germany. Now they're only just across the Channel—almost in sight."

This was so true that Sibylla could not escape a pinch of fear, but she said stoutly:

"Everyone thought they'd come the first night of the war and they never did, so I expect they won't come now."

"I expect they will," said Violet maddeningly.

Sibylla fought to keep her temper, which was all the more difficult in that Violet had really made her feel frightened.

"What are *you* going to do, then? Are *you* leaving?"

"Well, I haven't made up my mind. Of course I don't want to go. I'm not like you—I haven't anyone I can go and stay with, and all the safe places are so dreadfully crowded and expensive."

"I should have thought Arthur would have offered to have you, considering how you had him and Olive and the girls all staying with you for the first three months of the war."

Violet dashed her a malevolent look.

"You know we haven't been on speaking terms since then. They behaved outrageously, treating my house like a hotel and crowning their work by taking away Maria. I shouldn't dream of going near them."

"Well, why not go to a nice hotel—Matlock or Stratford-on-Avon, or somewhere else in the middle? You can afford it."

"You sound as if you wanted me to go."

"Of course I don't." Sibylla coloured as she spoke, for she had not told the truth. Violet was her oldest friend—almost the only friend she had left from old happy days gone by—but there were moments when she felt that she would be definitely easier and hap-

pier if Violet were out of the town. She had a demoralizing effect upon her, always coming to her with alarmist news, which was sometimes only too true, as in the case of the capitulation of France. "You sound as if you wanted *me* to go," she finished.

"Well, you've two sisters, both living in safe areas—still safe areas, I mean, for after all this place was considered safe two months ago. If you don't want to go to them, why shouldn't you and I go away together? We could find a place that wasn't too expensive for you."

Sibylla now guessed what Violet was driving at, and her whole being tightened up in opposition.

"I don't suppose for a moment that we could find a place cheap enough to suit me and at the same time comfortable enough to suit you. Besides, I've told you, Violet—I don't want to go; I'd rather stay here."

"But I think you *ought* to go—I think everyone who hasn't a real reason for staying *ought* to go."

"I don't know what you mean by 'ought.' If there's any danger, it's my own concern if I stay in it or not. I've no one but myself to consider. Nor," she added spitefully, "have you."

"But you don't want to be here when the invasion comes. This place will probably be the first that they'll destroy. Bertie Pym-Barrett says they'll either land here or at the Stussels—there's a perfect landing-beach at the Stussels."

"I don't believe a word Bertie Pym-Barrett says. He's always wrong."

"He was right about Paris being surrendered without a blow."

"Yes, because he'd just heard it on the wireless."

The few people walking in High Street stared at the two old ladies arguing on the pavement outside Budgen's, and wondered how they could find so much energy on such a hot day.

"It doesn't take the wireless to tell one that Hitler means to invade this country."

"You said he was going to invade us immediately after Dunkirk, but he never came."

"Well, he's coming now. He's said it; he's said he means to be in London by August the fifteenth, so he'll have to come soon."

Sibylla felt the inside of her mouth drying up. She was only just able to articulate:

"But it doesn't follow that he'll come here."

"My dear, where else? We're right in the south-east corner of England—he can't avoid us. This place, I tell you, is right in the front line; and they say it's down for evacuation at an early date."

"Who's 'they'?"—Violet had far too many rumours from this source.

"Everyone. Everyone knows this town is going to be evacuated, so everyone's leaving while it's possible to travel in the ordinary way."

"I don't believe it; and if it's true that only decides me—I'll stay here till I'm ordered to go."

"But then it will be too late. Think of the roads in France—think of the fleeing civilians being bombed and machine-gunned all along them, and the Germans driving their tanks over their bodies. You don't want anything like that to happen to you."

Sibylla did not, but nothing would induce her to say so. Luckily at that moment the High Street 'bus approached them, gathering speed after its stop just below Station Road. She wished that she had seen it earlier, for it would not pull up between official stopping-places; but thank goodness she was still able-bodied enough to jump on a 'bus if it wasn't moving very fast, whereas Violet—weighing now well over fourteen stone—was not. With a cry of "There's the 'bus—I must run. Good-bye," she dashed for it, and a few seconds later was clinging precariously to the rail, with her knee on the step, and the conductor's arm round her waist as he dragged her from her uncertain poise between security and destruction.

"Now, really, lady, you shouldn't ought to have done that. It's not fair on me and the other passengers, to say nothing of yourself."

"I'm sorry—I thought I could manage it all right. I did last time."

"Pardon me, lady, you didn't; only I caught you sooner. If you'll excuse me saying so, it's a thing you shouldn't dream of doing at your age. It's rash at any age, but when a person isn't so young as they was, it's sheer madness."

Sibylla took her seat feeling shaken and rebuked, though not resentful, as this particular conductor was a favourite of hers. All she hoped was that Violet Faircloth had not been a witness of her ignominy, but had little doubt that she had seen everything. Well, at least she had escaped from *her* and could now quietly settle her alarms without having those of other people—all the worse for being so like her own—intruded upon her. It was an exhausting business, this effort not to be frightened, and Violet added to its difficulty by ap-

parently not making any effort at all, but babbling freely of her fears and plans for giving way to them.

Sibylla had not minded the schoolchildren leaving the town, or the people who had come there from London and other unsafe places at the beginning of the war. But when the actual residents—her own friends and the friends of friends—began to depart, she had been made uneasy and uncertain as to what she herself should do. Though she was desperately afraid of being bombed and still more of being invaded, there seemed to her something peculiarly base in running away from the town which had been for so many years her safe and comfortable home, just because owing to a mere perversity of geographical position it was now in danger. Moreover, it was a long time since she had left Number Four Monypenny Crescent, even to stay with one of her sisters. As the years passed she had grown more and more to dislike the idea of leaving that concentration of comforts, memories and beloved objects which had by now become almost a part of herself. She felt particularly reluctant to leave it at a time when it was supposed to be in danger. The more her home was threatened the more she dreaded leaving its familiar reassurances for some unknown, unfriendly safety. It was her refuge, her hole, in which nature urged her to hide herself and her fears. At the same time it was her precious possession, her beloved place, which it would be treachery as well as folly to leave unguarded in the hour of peril.

Well, there was no need to make an immediate decision, for she did not think that Hitler was ready to come yet, either by bombing deputy or in invading person. He would have to reorganize his forces and turn round a bit after the conquest of France. He might even be so much afraid of the R.A.F. that he might never come at all. He might be like Napoleon, who had never come, but had camped for years on the coast of France, gazing at the Martello towers . . .

Certainly Marlingate did not that morning look like a doomed city. The High Street shops and houses baked gently in the sunshine, as they had baked through so many Junes, wearing one and all an air of comfortable habitation. The pavements were not so crowded as usual, and there was a noticeable absence of children in the town; but such people as were about strolled unperturbedly in the heat, chatting, lighting cigarettes, staring into the shop-windows, while their dogs, outrageous as ever, lifted their legs against the

lamp-posts—for all the world as if the German army were not only thirty miles away.

Indeed, Sibylla thought, the town seemed far less frightened, as well as less frightening, than at the time of the evacuation from Dunkirk, when the air had been full of the thump and rumble of guns and out at sea the burning oil-dumps of the Channel ports had spread a dark smear over the horizon—a smear which one day had risen and covered the sky, drifting round the sun like a thunder-storm and shutting Marlingate into darkness, so that she had been obliged to turn on the light to read her newspaper. Today there was neither smoke nor gunfire. As far as appearances went the war might be over.

The fact was that, as so many times before, Sibylla had recovered her morale under the soothing influence of the High Street 'bus. The 'bus was a comforting, familiar thing, and it had given her the reassurance of its undisturbed progress and regular time-table—even the circumstance of her having entered it on her nose did not detract from its atmosphere of security.

This was the third war through which she had travelled in the High Street 'bus, jogging peacefully between the high pavements, from the Marine Parade to the French Gun. In the South African War it had been drawn by horses—two to take it down the street, three to take it up again—and had smelt inside of straw and stables. During the Last War, it had been run on petrol for the first three years, and then had carried on its roof a vast, flapping balloon full of coal-gas. Both methods of propulsion had stunk horribly. In This War, the 'bus smelt only vaguely of Lysol; the seats had chromium frames, and were luxuriously padded and attractively covered in floral tapestry. Sitting comfortably in hers, Sibylla could feel her life close up and become a 'bus journey through three wars; the years between were telescoped and war became her normal, accustomed environment.

The only trouble was that each war had crept a little nearer to the High Street 'bus. The South African War had had very little to do with it at all—she had scarcely thought of it as she jogged to and from the rehearsals of *Patience* at the Marine Hotel. All she had thought of had been a man . . . sitting in the front seat to avoid her sisters and Violet Faircloth, her heart full of craving, her head full of tunes. . . . In the Last War her hands had been full of parcels—her hands and her lap—parcels for dear Mother, who had sent her

shopping all over the town . . . hunting for sausages and tea and eggs and cauliflowers, insisting that the things must be in the shops and that Sibylla was not to pay a penny more for them than the price written down on her list. . . . In This War she had scarcely had to hunt at all. Rationing had come in almost at once, instead of near the end, and had saved her a lot of exertion as well as a lot of money. She was registered at Budgen's, and Mr. Budgen—*young* Mr. Budgen it was now, of course, the old man having died in 1933—always kept her a share of such unrationed goods as were on the market, so that as long as she was content with little (and Sibylla would have thought it unpatriotic to want more) she would not have to go shop-crawling like Violet Faircloth, who thought nothing of travelling to Bexhill, Eastbourne, or even London, in search of delicacies she could not buy in Marlingate.

Today the progress of the 'bus was slow, for the narrow street was blocked by two big cars travelling up it under piles of luggage towards the country. The sight of them reminded Sibylla of the early days of This War, when the process had been reversed and the street blocked by cars pouring down it into the town, laden with people and luggage seeking safety in Marlingate. How reassured she had felt at the sight of all those refugees!—how discomposed she was now at the spectacle of their reversed flight! It made her wonder if some day the war might not come near enough to stop the High Street 'bus. . . .

"French Gun—end of penny stage," said the conductor, and added scathingly, "Some people must think their skins are worth a lot of money seeing what they'll spend on saving 'em."

There were contemptuous murmurs among the passengers, and Sibylla, rather to her own surprise, found herself saying as she was handed down, "That's a compliment I'll never pay Hitler—running away from him."

"Good for you, mum," said the conductor, and nodded back at the passengers as if to say: if there were more people like this lady we could count on winning the war this year. Sibylla walked away from the 'bus with the comfortable feeling that her exit had redeemed her entrance.

Nothing could look more peaceful than Number Four Mony-penny Crescent. The sun had made it smile, and at the same time the

drawn blinds—Sibylla noted with satisfaction that all the blinds on her two floors were drawn—gave it an air of sleep. The smiling, sleeping house welcomed her home as she climbed the hill, promising her food and rest and shade. It was not perhaps so dazzlingly white as it used to be, for she could not afford to have it painted very often, but it did not look so bad in comparison with other houses in the terrace, some of which were distinctly shabby.

Certain other things about it had changed as well as the colour. It no longer stood out against a background of green boughs, for the captive tree that once had topped it had had the usual short life of its kind. It had rotted and had had to be cut down, and now only a trunk stood in the back garden—a trunk which might appear to some like a broken column on a grave, but which to Sibylla was more beautiful than when it had supported a proud head, for she had trained a rambler rose against it and hidden it in a mass of bloom.

Another change was that the front door through which she had walked in and out for so many years had been superseded, as far as she was concerned, by an outer flight of steps, which led up to her own front door on the first floor. For Number Four was now a block of flats—or rather of three flats and a maisonette. The basement where so many maids had worked and wilted was now the home of a corporation employee and his family. Their entrance was the old servants' entrance in the area. The ground-floor was inhabited by a childless couple who slept in the room where Colonel Landless used to sit and read the *Morning Post*, lived in what used to be the family dining-room, and cooked in the gentlemen's cloakroom, now the kitchenette. On the top floor lived a lady and her daughter, both very quiet and well-behaved. Sibylla was particular as to her tenants and would not let without personal references.

Her own residence was made up of the two central floors, much as her private cinema had pictured them to her twenty-odd years ago. Here she lived very comfortably, for in addition to the income derived from the five thousand pounds her mother had left her, she had the rent of the flats. She certainly was not well off, but as she spent no money on travel and very little on entertaining either herself or her friends, she had plenty for her needs, and could afford to keep a maid, though not a very highly trained one.

The first thing anyone entering the flat with her today would

have noticed was the amount of furniture. Number Four had always been well filled, but now that all the contents of five floors had been crammed into two, the congestion was overpowering. Sibylla had kept everything—loving everything and feeling apart from this that she would never be able to buy such good articles in a modern, scrambling world. Besides, there were all those Indian things of Father's—they must be valuable and should on no account be parted with. She had of course invited her sisters to take their choice—dear Mother had provided for that in her will when she left the house and effects to those of her daughters "who at the time of my death shall be still unmarried"—but, curiously enough, none of them had seemed to want very much. Even Myra, newly married and setting up her own home, had taken only a clock, and Kitty and Georgie had been content with silver and china and a few chairs. Sibylla was surprised, but also relieved. She was thankful for this concentration of beloved objects which now compelled her to thread her way through the tiny hall, into a drawing-room which looked rather like a repository.

The clock on the mantelpiece—bought at the Paris Exhibition and consisting of two fat gold cherubs weaving garlands round a pink dial—struck a quarter to one. She was in plenty of time for lunch—a whole ten minutes to recover breath and coolness, both a little impaired by her climb up the hill and the outside steps which had been built perhaps a little too precipitously. What a mercy it was to have the place to herself! . . . She always thought that every time she came home, though now over three months had passed since the last of the boys went away.

The boys . . . one comfort that the threat of invasion had brought her, one relief for which the assault of a whole panzer division did not seem (at the moment) too high a price to pay, was the fact that Marlingate had ceased to be a reception area. Soon after Dunkirk such evacuees as lingered in the town had been sent away to safer districts in Wales and Cornwall. Sibylla need never any more come back to her house in dread of what she might find there.

She had experienced such a dread almost constantly since that September Sunday when returning from church, already sufficiently discomposed by the outbreak of war and her first (though abortive) air-raid alarm, she had found her rooms apparently full of boys between the ages of ten and thirteen. The billeting officer—she was told

by her resentful and indignant maid—had deposited them there half an hour ago and said that Miss Landless would be lucky if she did not have to take in any more.

Nothing but spite, thought Sibylla, could account for such an allotment. She had particularly told the officer—a doctor's wife who had come to the town no more than three years ago—that she could accommodate only some quiet elderly person, who would not be likely to upset her maid or spoil her furniture. She had thought that in doing as much as that she was doing all that could be required of her—even more, for she might, like Violet Faircloth, have filled up her home with friends or relations in order to escape evacuees. But she supposed that she doctor's wife did not like her because when old Doctor Miller died last Christmas, leaving her in the middle of an attack of bronchitis, she had not called in her husband but had sent for Doctor Steele who had at least been longer than three years in the town. It must be in revenge for this professional slight she had quartered on her four gangsters from Stepney—for they turned out to be only four when counted, though being in a state of perpetual motion and unceasing noise, they looked and sounded like a dozen.

Sibylla's first reaction had been to try to distribute as many as possible among her tenants, going so far as to promise that such relief would be accepted in lieu of rent. But all the other floors were already full of unwelcome strangers, and nobody thought any one of Sibylla's boys a fair exchange for even a mother and baby.

At her wits' end she had gone off to the Billeting Office, where she had waited for an hour before being told by a harassed official that she had better be content with what she'd got because she might be given worse—"some of these people are simply crawling, and though we've kept them back as long as we could, in the end we shall have to put them somewhere." So Sibylla had returned miserably and wearily to Monypenny Crescent, where she had found her maid in the act of walking out of the front door with her suit-case, while the boys were making their own tea in the kitchen and eating it in apparently every room in the house.

After one or two feeble efforts to restore order she had locked herself into her own bedroom, sat down and burst into tears. She was an old woman, just on seventy, and it was years since she had cried, but she sat and sobbed till her chest and head were aching,

while round her and under her doors banged, voices whooped, boots thudded and scraped, and every now and then a crash of breaking china or falling glass announced the death of some beloved object.

Then suddenly the noise had abated and she had heard a new voice amongst it—a woman's voice. What had happened? Had the billeting officer come back?—had she brought a new supply of devils even more wicked than the first? Trembling between hope and fear Sibylla crept out of her room, to hear light footsteps running upstairs and a fresh young voice calling, “Is that you, Miss Landless?”

“Yes. Is that Mrs. Clifford? . . . Oh, no, it's you, Miss Yeoveney—oh! . . .”

She did not know what to say to the young neighbour from Becket Grove who had just come in.

“I'm sorry to burst in on you like this,” said the girl, “but I ran round just to see how you were getting on, and as no one answered the bell and I heard all this noise inside I thought I'd better just walk in.”

“It's very kind of you, dear,” said Sibylla in a shaking voice, and indeed it was kind of Joyce Yeoveney (whom she knew only as a fellow-member of the Communicants' Guild at St. Nicholas', for her mother was not at all the sort of person one could call on) to have come round to enquire after her on a day like this. “You see what a state I'm in.”

“Yes, indeed I do”—the voice of twenty-two was motherly with kindness—“and I'm so sorry you've been let in for all this. Now won't you come down to the drawing-room and let me make you a cup of tea?”

“But—but the boys are all over the drawing-room.”

“Oh, no, they're not, Miss Landless. I've told them they must stay in the kitchen, and they're all in there now.”

Sibylla listened as a Victorian atheist might have listened to some first-hand account of a miracle.

“But, my dear, how did you manage that? It—it just doesn't seem possible.”

“Oh, they're quite nice boys, really, Miss Landless, but excited and a bit frightened of being in a strange place.”

“Frightened!”

“Yes; they aren't used to a house like this and they rush about

and make a lot of noise to keep their spirits up. But they'll soon quiet down, especially when their school gets going."

She made Sibylla rest on the drawing-room sofa while she went to make the tea. The room was not really so badly devastated as the noise had suggested, though a chair and one or two china ornaments had been broken.

"I'll get the boys to mend them," said Joyce. "It'll be something to keep them quiet, which is what we must try for at present. I'm used to this sort of thing, because I've got an evening class for boys at the Fishermen's Institute, and we do a lot of mending as well as making."

"My dear, I really don't know how to thank you," murmured Sibylla as she sipped her tea.

"Oh, I'm only too glad, Miss Landless. I like boys and I like to feel I'm doing something to help at a time like this. We haven't got any evacuees at our place, because both my aunties wrote and asked if they might come and stay."

"I wish I had invited someone in London to come and stay with me, then I might have been spared all this. But I didn't want to do anything that might seem unpatriotic—like some people," she added with a sudden violence that nearly upset her tea.

"Well, Mother says she'd rather have vackies than my Aunt Bella, but she couldn't do anything about it, as she wrote and begged her to have her and my other auntie; and they live in Woolwich, quite near the Arsenal, so they've as much need to come here as anyone."

"My dear Miss Yeoveney, don't think for a moment that I meant you. I was thinking of someone quite different—a friend . . . I only wish now, though, that my sisters, Mrs. Lintine and Mrs. Hardcastle and Mrs. Street, didn't all live in reception areas too. You've been a lot of help and made things very much better, but I don't understand boys—I don't like boys—and I don't *want* boys."

She felt as if she was going to cry again and gulped her tea.

"It's a shame," said Joyce indignantly. "They should never have sent boys here. Much better have sent girls, or a couple of women with babies. But the fact is the billeting people simply don't know what they're doing, their hands are so full. It's all one great big muddle, if you ask me. But don't you worry, Miss Landless; everyone says the war will be over by Christmas."

She stayed at Number Four the whole evening, gave the boys

their supper and finally disposed of them on a couple of mattresses on the floor of the departed Edith's bedroom. The next morning she was back again, and after getting their breakfast took them all out with her to interview their school-teacher and see if she could possibly find them other billets.

In this she was unsuccessful, for all the inhabitants of Marlingate were apparently engaged in the same quest, and the billeting officials had been forced to take refuge in an attitude of total obstruction. But the situation had already become brighter, owing to Joyce Yeoveney's adoption of Sibylla's evacuees as part of her war-work, and in time it was improved almost beyond recognition by the recall of two boys by their parents to Stepney, "where we haven't had no air raids like we was promised." A third boy went home for the Christmas holidays and did not come back; and at last the fourth, after lingering apparently forgotten by all his relations till the end of March, was fetched away by his mother, who, as she informed a startled Sibylla, was marrying his father and "thought it just as well to have Fred with us, seeing as he belongs to both."

On the whole, then, Sibylla had not done so badly as Violet Faircloth, whose unpatriotic scheme for avoiding her duty had ended in well-deserved disaster. Not only had she quarrelled irremediably with her brother and his family as a result of their three-months sojourn under her roof, but when they left they had taken away with them her treasured maid, Maria, basely luring her with the offer of fabulous wages. Violet had sat weeping for a whole hour in Sibylla's drawing-room, telling her about it, and Sibylla had done her best, with the help of prayer, to conceal her elation.

But the most substantial fruit of the experience, one that had made it almost worth enduring, was the friendship of little Joyce Yeoveney, who had continued to run in and out of Number Four Monypenny Crescent even after the last of the boys had left it. Sibylla found it difficult to imagine how she had ever lived without that pretty little face and cheerful voice. She was full of life and kindness, always ready to help or entertain—to mend Sibylla's stockings or trim her hat, to fix the black-out, find her a new maid, or go with her to the cinema. It was almost, Sibylla thought, like having a daughter.

The likeness was increased by the fact that she still did not have to know the rest of the family, though she would have gone so far as to pay that price for Joyce's companionship. However, the child

remained conveniently detached from her low-grade parent and the even more detrimental "aunties." She had attached herself to Sibylla, for reasons that it did not occur to the latter to investigate. She accepted Joyce's devotion with gratitude, but without surprise, much as she would have accepted it had she really been her daughter. It was, she sometimes told Violet, like herself and her dear mother over again.

The luncheon-bell roused her from her thoughts and at the same time reminded her that she had neither washed her hands nor taken off her hat. She hesitated for a moment between two evils—to go in unkempt as she was or to upset Norma by further delay. She decided on the first and marched into the dining-room, trying to look as if she had just entered the house.

"Mrs. Street rung you up, miss, half an hour ago," said Norma as she uncovered the mince, "and she said she'd ring again at two; and the butcher's boy says they had two bombs out there last night."

"What!—not at Pyramus!"

"He said Ticehurst—killed a pony and a whole lodgful of chicken."

"Oh, that's twelve miles away—nowhere near them."

"Quite near enough, if you ask me, miss, and near enough to us too. It won't be long, I guess, before they get tired of killing livestock and drop a few bombs on Marlingate."

"Why Marlingate?—why not Eastbourne, or Hastings, or Dover, or Folkestone? Don't be silly, Norma, and don't talk about such things—it's our duty not to spread rumours that cause alarm and despondency. And don't call me 'miss' again. I've told you so many times that the proper way to address me is 'ma'am' or 'madam.'"

Norma said nothing, but walked out of the room on her high heels, tossing her head in indignation. Sibylla had upset her after all, and might just as well have delayed lunch while she made herself tidy and comfortable. But she herself had been upset by her talk: bombs at Ticehurst . . . the planes must have flown very near Marlingate to get there . . . and why bomb Ticehurst, where there could be no military objectives whatever? Either the Germans were like Tweedledee and out to bomb everything they saw, or else they were like Tweedledum and out to bomb everything within reach, whether they saw it or not. Neither prospect was reassuring.

She ate her mince and after some hesitation rang for the rice

pudding, which Norma banged down in front of her without speaking. As once more she whisked out of the room, her flying skirt in the tail of Sibylla's eye recalled a vision of better maids who in better times had gone in and out—not of this room, which was actually dear Mother's bedroom, but of the old ground-floor dining-room—maids with huge white aprons that nearly touched their toes, maids with flying white streamers that nearly touched their heels, and goffered caps like ham-frills that covered the whole of their frizzy hair. . . . Gradually the aprons and streamers had shrunk till the latter had totally disappeared and the former became a mere patch on a dress which was no black, respectful uniform but some old best dress made to do for the inferior service of the dining-room. Sibylla shut her eyes so that she might picture more vividly those regretted ghosts from a Victorian basement.

The telephone bell rang and reminded her of at least one improvement that modern times had brought. Neither Father nor Mother would have the telephone installed, and in doing so herself, Sibylla had been conscious of a certain treachery to their memory. But her sisters had urged her, had insisted, and really she had been only too glad to give way. Now the voice was Myra's, as she had expected.

"That you, Sibylla? How are you?—getting on all right?"

"Yes, very well indeed, thanks."

"I was wondering if you'd care to come out here one day soon. It seems ages since we saw anything of you. Which day would suit you best?"

"Any day except Friday, which is my day at the Red Cross."

"If you'll make it Saturday, I could drive you out, for I've got to come in on Saturday morning for some shopping. I suppose there's no hope of persuading you to stay the week-end?"

"Oh, no, thanks very much—I must get back. I can take the six-o'clock 'bus."

"I wish you'd stay longer."

"Thanks, but I really can't—I couldn't possibly leave Norma here alone at night."

"Couldn't she go home?"

"Then the place would be empty—I shouldn't like that at all. No, Myra, let me come to lunch and spend the afternoon; I should only worry if I stopped away longer. It will be nice to see you all. How are you?—how's Toby?—how's Susie?"

"Oh, we're all very fit and well, though Toby's terribly over-worked, what with being short-handed on the farm and running this new L.D.V. business."

"And have you good news of Bernard?"

"Yes; he's got his corporal's stripes and seems very pleased with himself."

"Oh! . . ." She broke off, for she saw that Joyce Yeoveney had just come into the room. She had the freedom of a daughter, and came in and out as she pleased. "I won't be long, dear—no, that was meant for Joyce; she's just come in. By the way, Myra, I've been told that bombs were dropped at Ticehurst last night. Did you hear anything of them?"

"Nothing, really, though Susie says she did. There were a lot of planes about. I expect you heard them over Marlingate."

"No, thank heaven, I never hear anything at night. I sleep much too soundly."

Myra's laugh came pleasantly.

"Good old Sibylla—that's the way to treat the Hun. Go to sleep and forget him. Cheer-oh; and I'll call for you at half past twelve on Saturday."

"I'll be ready. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Sibylla hung up the receiver, pleased with herself, for Myra had seemed to think she was not frightened.

"Well, Joyce dear, it's nice to see you."

She turned back into the room with a comfortable feeling of affection. It was nice to see Joyce's friendly, smiling little face, so pretty and yet owing none of its prettiness (at least so Sibylla imagined) to those strident aids to beauty that spoiled the modern girl. Joyce was not modern—she was a "home-girl," as she herself had been, content with homely tasks and simple pleasures and the face that God had given her.

"Is it all right for me to come in now, Miss Landless?—you're not thinking of taking a nap?"

"Oh no—nothing of the kind. I'm very pleased to see you."

"I—I've come to tell you some news."

She realized now that from the start she had noticed a hesitation in Joyce's manner, as if there were a reason for her presence

beyond common friendliness. Her heart bumped with a sudden fear as she realized that Joyce might have come to tell her that she was leaving the town. The nervous aunties might no longer consider Marlingate a suitable refuge and be about to drag her mother away with them to some safer place.

"What is it, dear? Nothing bad, I hope."

"Oh, no—nothing bad, but it may surprise you. I'm going to join the A.T.S."

Sibylla stared at her, for a moment bewildered, and Joyce elaborated.

"You know—the women's army. All that's been happening since Dunkirk has made me feel I ought to do something more than I'm doing for the war; and I believe they're short of girls."

"Does this mean you'll have to leave the town?"

"Oh yes. I don't know where they'll send me, but I'll have to go away."

Sibylla felt a pang that almost deprived her of speech.

"Won't your mother miss you?" she asked, meaning "Don't you realize how much I shall?"

"Oh no; Mother's got my aunties with her. She'll be all right. But I'm sorry to be leaving you, Miss Landless—I really am."

Sibylla turned away from her.

"I'm more sorry than I can tell."

"I wouldn't do it, except that I feel I must. There isn't anything really useful I can do in this town. I know there's A.R.P. and all that, but they seem to have all the people they want at present, and when you come to look at it, Miss Landless, it doesn't really seem to matter what happens to Marlingate."

This was a view that Sibylla could not accept.

"In my opinion Marlingate matters just as much as anywhere else."

"It does in one way, of course, but not in others. I mean it's not a manufacturing town or a military objective. If I join the A.T.S. I'll be sent where I'm really needed from a military point of view. I shall be a sort of soldier—and that's what I want."

"I see."

"Miss Landless, you're not annoyed with me, are you?"

"No, my dear—of course not. I'm a soldier's daughter. I—I think you're doing a very fine thing. But I can't help feeling I shall miss

you dreadfully, and that this poor old town isn't quite so worthless as you seem to think. After all, it's right in the front line. You could scarcely be nearer to the German army than you are now."

"I know, Miss Landless—and that's another thing I want to talk to you about. Don't you think *you* ought to go?"

"And join the A.T.S.?" Sibylla's poor attempt at jocularity passed unheeded.

"No; I mean go right away to somewhere safer. You've a sister in Shropshire and a sister in Bedfordshire. Couldn't you go and stay with one of them for a bit?"

"Yes, I could; but I don't want to. I don't like the idea of leaving my home and then coming back to find it smashed to pieces."

"If it's going to be smashed, you'd far better be out of the way. Everyone seems to think Marlingate is sure to be bombed, and invaded too. They say Hitler wants to land here because it'll make him feel like William the Conqueror."

"Is your mother going away?"

"Well, I don't know that she is. You see, she has nowhere to go and she can't afford to pay the rent of two places. But I don't worry about her so much. She's got my aunties with her, but you're here all alone."

"I've a sister living only ten miles away."

"Yes; but you mightn't be able to get to her if anything happened, and anyway she might be in it too. I think you ought to go right away, Miss Landless—to some really safe place. They say that in Shropshire you wouldn't know there was a war on."

"I don't particularly care for my sister's place in Shropshire. There are no church privileges. And anyhow the journey's much too long and difficult in war-time."

"Well, there's your sister in Bedfordshire. Couldn't you go to her?"

"Oh no, I shouldn't like that at all. I've told you, dear, that I don't want to leave home. I shall miss you, but I shan't miss you so much as I should if I left this place. You see, I've got my home and my church, and when you come *on* leave I shall see you again, as I shouldn't if I went away."

"I'd come to see you wherever you were, Miss Landless. I'd make a point of it just as much as seeing Mother—I really would."

"I know you would, dear. You've been like a daughter to me all these months. I was thinking only the other day that you reminded

me of myself and my dear mother when she was alive. It was just the same."

Tears suddenly swam into her eyes from some source below memory, and she walked over to the window, looking out through their blur at the sunny, sleepy streets of the town.

"It doesn't look as if the war could possibly be so near," she remarked, to change the key of her thoughts.

"I know; but I'm afraid—I mean I feel something will happen soon. After all, he isn't likely to sit just looking at us; and there were German 'planes over last night."

"Did you hear them?"

"No; but they did at the observation post over by French Land-ing. And I expect you've heard that bombs were dropped at Tice-hurst."

"Oh, I'm sick of those bombs," cried Sibylla petulantly. "Every-one does nothing but talk about them. You'd think Ticehurst was quite close, instead of nearly fifteen miles away."

"You're very brave, Miss Landless," said Joyce simply.

"I'm a soldier's daughter, my dear; so I ought to know how to behave when there's any danger about. Now tell me some more about yourself. When do you think you'll be leaving?"

"Oh, not for a week or two yet. I'll be able to put you straight before I go, so that you can carry on without me. I wish I could find you a nicer girl than Norma, but I don't think there's one in the town."

"No; domestic service isn't exciting enough for girls nowadays. I expect Norma will be leaving soon. Perhaps *she'll* join the A.T.S."

"Oh, I'm sure I hope not, Miss Landless. And I hope she stays with you, because she's better than nothing. I suppose, Miss Land-less, that—if you're determined to stay on in the town—you wouldn't care to go and live with Miss Faircloth?"

"Oh no—that wouldn't do at all." Sibylla bristled at the thought. "Besides, I'd be no safer there than here."

"But you wouldn't be alone. That's what worries me."

"Don't worry about me, dear. I'm perfectly all right, and where I want to be. After all, if there was any real danger the town would probably be evacuated."

"Oh, but, Miss Landless, you don't want to be a refugee."

Sibylla's mind was dragged back to a still more terrifying con-

versation earlier in the day, and she determined not to let it stay there.

"I don't suppose for a minute it will come to that," she said firmly. "And now, dear, what about coming with me to the Paragon and having tea afterwards?—we may as well have some little treats together while you're still here."

"Oh, Miss Landless, how kind you are! I should simply love it. They've got a *Thin Man* film there this week and I've been dying to see it."

"Very well, then—let's start at once. I'll just go and tell Norma I shan't be in to tea. No, I won't, for she'd probably take advantage of it and go out . . . but I don't want her to waste tea and bread and butter if I'm not in. . . . I know what—I'll tell her I may be late, and she's not to put the kettle on till I let her know."

She was moving towards the kitchen with this idea when the telephone suddenly rang again. Directly she picked up the receiver she knew by the dinning voice that it was Violet Faircloth.

"Yes, this is Marlingate three-six-five. Is that you, Violet? Do you mind not speaking quite so loud. I can't hear you when you shout."

Violet's mother had had the telephone installed in 1890, and her daughter still used the technique of those early days, with deafening results.

"Are you there? Is that Sibylla?"

"Yes—Sibylla speaking."

"I rang up to know if you'd heard the news."

"What news?"

"There's been two bombs dropped at Ticehurst."

"Oh, Violet, for mercy's sake don't tell me anything about those bombs. I'm sick of them."

"Well, it's pretty serious—only a few miles away; and quite close to your sister Myra, isn't it?"

"Ticehurst must be at least twelve miles from Pyramus."

"Well she's had a lucky escape—and so have we all. Sibylla, do you still feel like staying on in Marlingate after this?"

"I can't see that it makes any difference."

"Oh, can't you? I'm afraid you will before so very much longer. Don't you remember those lectures of Mr. Hayward's?"

Sibylla remembered them only too well. Her flesh had been made to creep as early as the summer of 1938.

"But the Germans aren't using gas," she said feebly.

"They will—depend on it. Any old aeroplane will do—just to pop across the sea in five minutes and spray us all with Lewisite."

"Oh, Violet, do stop thinking of such things. They don't help at all now—and nothing's happened yet except a few bombs dropped in a country district miles away, where they've done no more than kill a few hens. To hear you talk one would think London had been razed to the ground."

"Well, it seemed to me a friendly action to ring you up and tell you what was going on in case you didn't know."

"Thanks—but I really don't think this sort of conversation helps the war effort. If you're afraid, you should keep your fears to yourself."

Violet's laugh came like a high-pitched explosion over the wires.

"My dear Sibylla, you must be in a perfect frenzy of nerves or you wouldn't be so upset at my passing on a bit of news like this. I thought you'd be interested; but I seem to be frightening you, so I'll ring off. Good-bye."

Two receivers were hung up with a simultaneous violence that must have rattled through the exchange.

"That was Miss Faircloth," said Sibylla unnecessarily. "Perhaps you understand now why I don't want to go and live with her." She was going to add, "She frightens me to death," but checked herself just in time.

"Yes. I couldn't help hearing what she was saying because she talked so loud. But I suggested it because I thought you and she were such friends."

Violet had more than once shown her jealousy of Joyce Yeoveney.

"So we are. But I don't like to hear anyone talk like that."

"She seems to have got an awful wind-up. I wonder she stays on in Marlingate."

"Oh, she won't go. She doesn't want to leave her home any more than I do. She'll tell everyone they ought to go and that she means to go. But she'll stay."

There had been a note of regret in Sibylla's voice at the beginning of this reply, but it vanished while she spoke. For suddenly she had realized that if Violet went away she would have nobody left in Marlingate—nobody that mattered. Not only was she losing Joyce, but most of the people she knew had already left the town—such few as survived of her really old friends who forty years ago had

been in the cast of *Patience*. . . . Only the Pym-Barretts remained, and he was almost bedridden and a fussy old bore and she had become a British Israelite who was always involving Sibylla in theological controversies. Maddening as she often was, Sibylla could not deny that she would miss Violet. The town would seem empty indeed without her large presence and booming voice, and life very flat without the chance of meeting her in High Street or on the Marine Parade. After all, she was her oldest friend and nearly as close a link as home itself with the days that were gone. Violet must not go away and she must not quarrel with Violet.

"I'll ring her up again when I get home," she said to Joyce, "and ask her to come round and have lunch with me tomorrow."

Joyce looked bewildered, but made no comment on a situation which was evidently beyond her understanding.

## II

**I**F there was one thing more incredible to Myra than her living at Pyramus Farm, it was that she should be so happy there.

When she had first seen it and right on until a few months after her marriage she had never thought of it apart from Lawrie Buckrose. It was his place, and could be hers only through him. If, inconceivably, she should live there without him, every beam and tile would cry out his loss. She would be far unhappier than if she were living a hundred miles away.

For the first months after her marriage she had avoided Pyramus, even that distant view of it from the garden at Ellenwhorne—not so much on account of what she felt about it as on account of what she feared she might feel. Every precaution had seemed worth taking to preserve a happiness so undeserved and unexpected.

She had never thought that she would be really happy with Toby, though that sudden warmth of feeling towards him which had kindled in the drawing-room at Monypenny Crescent had settled down into a stability which had at the moment seemed impossible. His care and devotion during those days before marriage, his quiet efficiency and strength, had been a revelation to her after Lawrie's selfish muddling. Though she knew him well and had met him continually, she had seen very little of him either in private or in crisis.

Now he showed himself at his best in both, and their brief honeymoon had taught her more of the realities of love than all Lawrie's experienced ardours. It had shown her love as the unselfish emotion of "finding one's pleasure in felicity of another," and she came out of it with the hope at least that she loved Toby in the same way if not to the same degree as he loved her.

Another surprise had been the sudden and complete disintegration of her own love for Lawrie. It had been dying ever since the visit to Cornwall, but she had not expected it to be so quickly killed and deeply buried. He had given her heart some help by his own behaviour, which had been unexpectedly crude. She had been prepared for the reproaches of an outraged man, but the screams of an angry child had disgusted as well as surprised her.

"I see now that all you wanted was to marry somebody, and as it was impossible for me to marry you, you left me directly you found a man who could. Your own conscience should tell you what right you had to let me think you loved me, whereas you obviously had no use for me apart from what I was unable to give. I think it would have been a little more honourable if you had let me know the state of your feelings and had not led me to think that our love was as real and binding to you as it was to me."

Of course her behaviour must seem worse to him than it actually was, for she had not told him her true reason for marrying Toby Street; but his letter made her wonder grimly what his reactions would have been had she chosen the other road and brought her trouble to its author for solution. A short while later he wrote again, this time in a more conciliatory manner, obviously anxious to keep her friendship, and not entirely without hope of something in the future more like the past. He was like a spoilt child trying to maintain possession of a favourite toy. Myra never wrote to him again.

The next she heard (for news of him reached her both from the rumour of the countryside and from Kitty, who knew friends of his in town) was that he had been wounded and badly shell-shocked. Shortly afterwards he was known to be in hospital in London, and for some weeks she struggled with a pity that might have been love returning in disguise, urging her to go and visit him there. She restrained herself as part of that honourable relation she was trying to build up between herself and Toby after the birth of a son that was not his. The compunction which must always be mixed with the

happiness he gave her, had its share with that happiness in keeping her even from the risk of any new betrayal. She stayed away and shortly afterwards heard the almost unbelievable news that he was married.

Either he had met his heiress sooner than he expected, or in his shattered state had fallen a victim to some campaigning female of more address than Myra or even to the needs of his own suffering and helplessness. Something like the last must have happened, for he turned out to have married his nurse—a pretty girl, Kitty said, and of good family, but almost penniless.

"He himself," she wrote to Myra, "is a nervous wreck. He was round at the Crowthers the other afternoon and couldn't sit still for half a minute, always wriggling about in his chair and sometimes jumping right out of it, spinning round and sitting down again with a look on his face as if he'd just got a glimpse of hell. The girl must be pretty brave to take him on, or pretty desperate. They say he's going to be treated by one of those new psychological doctors, but I believe shell-shock cases are always liable to relapse, even after apparent cure. What a good thing you didn't marry him—apart from the fact that Toby's such a dear. He isn't even such a good match as I thought he'd be from a worldly point of view. The Crowthers say the Bewbush estate is on the verge of bankruptcy and he'll have to work hard if he's going to pull it round."

After that it was perhaps less astounding, though still inconceivable, to hear—this time from local sources—that the Bewbush Manor estate was going up for sale. Nothing could have shown her more clearly how utterly his experience—he had been buried for two days and blind for several weeks—had broken and changed him. He no longer had power to hurt her, but she wept for the death of those ambitions which had caused her such misery when they were alive.

The war was over now, and Toby had come home for good, unscathed in mind and body after four years' fighting—it seemed a miracle of which she was all unworthy when she looked round on so many empty hearts and broken men. Since the child's birth she had been living with his family at Ellenwhorne, but now that he had returned to civilian life it was better that they should have a home and a farm of their own. Mr. Street, prosperous after a war fought in the fields, was willing and able to lend them funds for a

start, and Toby had his war gratuity. The Bewbush estate was coming into the market just at the right moment.

Only the farms were for sale. The Manor House, with its grounds and park, was apparently entailed and could only be let on a long lease. Myra watched Toby hesitate between Pyramus and Haneholt. She made no attempt to influence him, for she herself was indifferent—her love of the place had died with her fear of it. She now felt that she could live contentedly with him anywhere. He must choose his farm for qualities likely to be useful to himself.

He chose Pyramus. It was the more conveniently situated of the two—only the river Tillingham lying between its fattening-grounds and those of Ellenwhorne. A bridge could be thrown across and in the future the two farms might, if necessary, be worked together. The land was only fairly good—Toby was inclined to criticize Shingrove's management and blamed Lawrie for being too ambitious for a man so much away—but the marsh pasture was valuable, and the arable fields could doubtless be improved by the slow and careful husbandry in which the Streets excelled. The barns were good and would pay for repairing, but he told Myra that he hoped she would not mind living in such an old-fashioned house.

"I'm afraid it will be a long time before we can afford to spend any money on it. Are you sure you don't mind, dear, living for a year or two without a bathroom?"

Myra did mind, but she answered truthfully when she said:

"I love it just as it is, and I'm glad you aren't going to change it."

What she had dreaded for it in the past had been Lawrie's plans for its improvement.

As she stood in the farmyard that June day it seemed to her that in twenty years Pyramus had scarcely changed at all. She had her bathroom now—she had had it before Susie was born—but the pipe that was its only external sign had long been hidden in a fall of jasmine, and the french window that had been added to lighten her rather dark sitting-room had lost some years ago any distinction from its surroundings. The place was as it had always been—with white-rimmed casements askew in the scarlet glow of its walls, a roof weathered golden by the distant sea, a tall gable that seemed to totter forward from the house, and a yard that was a place of use and business, rich with farmhouse smells and yielding none of its spaces to

the little stuffed garden that by now had almost smothered the front door and lower window-sills.

Today her thoughts had settled on the house like homing pigeons, because it was on a summer's day like this that she had first stood here in the yard, looking up at that hipped gable and rosy wall. Twenty-three years seemed to fall away from everything but herself. The place and the weather were the same, the country was at war and a man held her heart. True, it was a different war and a different man, but the states they engendered of anxiety and love seemed continuous with those of an earlier day. She seemed always to have lived in a world at war and in a world in which she did not belong to herself. Peace suddenly appeared as an impossible vacuum and the free heart was dead.

A little girl ran towards her out of one of the barns and immediately the place was changed, as much changed as herself. For it had become the home of a mother with children, of a farmer's wife who had almost forgotten that she had once been an author, of a middle-aged, grey-haired woman who had given up trying to look as young as she still felt.

"Susie, darling, where *have* you been?"

"In the oast-barn, Mummy, playing with Mrs. Perkins. Am I *very* grubby?"

"Your face is nearly black—otherwise you look much as usual."

"I ran into a cobweb while I was getting ready the nursing-home. Mummy, did you know that Mrs. Perkins was going into a nursing-home to have the kittens born? It's run by Nurse Prosser, who is very, very clean, so I thought it would be better than having them in the coal-hole like she did last time."

One of the peculiarities with which Susie perplexed her mother was her tendency to mix-up fiction with fact in the life of her imagination. Remembering her own fancy-flings and romantic releases in Ivy Bethersden, she was surprised to find her daughter taking her pleasure in such a very humdrum and realistic world. Her only imaginary character at the moment (for unlike Myra she varied them from time to time for no apparent reason) was Nurse Prosser, who was certainly not romantic and seemed in many ways more of a butt than a release. Nurse Prosser's life was mixed up rather eccentrically with those of the farmyard animals, especially Mrs. Perkins the cat, whom, doubtless because of her almost continuous motherhood, Susie pre-

ferred even to the yard and gun dogs and to the calves that she loved to feel sucking at her milky fingers. Myra liked to think that it was because of the greater freedom and happiness of her daughter's life that she was able to take pleasure in the world more or less as it was, without need of refuges or escapes into another. Her imagination played contentedly as it were in her own back-yard, though she, like Myra, was to all intents an only child, born late in the married life of her parents and separated by a gulf of years from the nearest member of the family.

"Mummy, when the kittens are born, do you think I should have them evacuated?"

"No, darling. I don't think that will be necessary. Our school-children here aren't being sent away, so I don't think Mrs. Perkins's need go. It isn't as if we lived in a town."

She was using the same argument and almost the same words that Toby had used to her when, in her first panic after Dunkirk and then again later at the fall of France, she had suggested that Susie ought to be sent out of a district that had seemed almost certain before long to hear the roar of panzers in its lanes. Her aunt Georgie would gladly give her a home in the Midlands, or Kitty would have her in Shropshire. Already several of her neighbours had made arrangements to send away their families, and though Myra could not picture life as endurable without her only little daughter, she felt that she would reproach herself for ever if the child came to any harm either mental or physical through being kept at home.

It had been a relief to have the matter settled and at the same time her own heart reassured by Toby's calm detachment from immediate frights and ability to view the situation from a quieter, less self-centred angle than her own.

"The school-children aren't being evacuated from Copstreet, and I don't like the idea of sending away my own child when village mothers aren't able to send theirs. If the danger was imminent, I take it our schools would be evacuated, as they are from the coast-towns. Susie's not a nervous child, and my own belief is that children are far less easily frightened than adults except *by* adults, if you know what I mean. It's up to us not to let her get scared."

Certainly the little girl was happier at home than she could have been with either of her aunts, and seemed to have small fear of foreboding in a situation which she only partly understood. Myra en-

sured as far as possible that she was not scared by the rumours and tales of the farm-people. . . . "No, I don't believe the Germans will come here; and if they do, you and I will go away together somewhere else. You won't have to see them. . . . If any parachutists come, Daddy and Brazier and Copthorn and all the L.D.V. will catch them and prevent them doing any harm. . . ." Thus she soothed not only her daughter but her own fears, making a little shelter for them both in the midst of all the alarms, reports and rumours that were raiding even this peaceful countryside. She never could be sure if the possession of a husband and children made her lot easier or not—sometimes they seemed the armour of her weakness, at others her hostages to a future that she dreaded only in so far as it threatened them.

Susie was her favourite child. Though she made every effort to hide her partiality from her family and from the outside world, she acknowledged it frankly to herself, and she was equally frank about the reason. She loved Susie better than Bernard because she loved her without compunction. Her heart had overflowed with thankfulness when she knew that at last she would have a child for whom Toby's love would not be a reproach and a lie. For fifteen years she had been hurt by his pride and love of Bernard, and not only his but also his parents', as they congratulated themselves on their first grandson, planning his future out of their own heredity, even finding, among their forbears a redhead to account for his.

Every time she saw that head—so exactly Lawrie's, with the dark red hair that was not coarse and thick but soft and fine, that had moreover the same double crown, making a tuft that could never be sleeked for long—Myra was reminded of her treachery towards those she loved best. There had been times when she had felt an almost uncontrollable urge to confess the truth to Toby, but she had been held back by the knowledge of all that confession would mean to him in the way of shock and pain. She knew that it had never occurred to him for a moment to imagine any secret in her past life. He had probably at one time been jealous of Lawrie, but she had allayed his fears, which had never been attached to any circumstances like those actually existing. He had feared a rival in the field of marriage, not a seducer for the woman whose integrity he would have held it an insult even to think in danger. The early and, as he thought, premature birth of the child had done no more than make him anxious

on her account. Even the fact that the baby weighed nine pounds at birth had not roused a question either in him or in his family. Their trust and innocence had smitten her like rods. They smote her still and must be her punishment.

For all these reasons she had been unable to attach herself to Bernard as a mother would normally attach herself to an only son. She had in fact been relieved by his regular absences at school and now, since war began, in the Army. When he was away she could cut out of her life all that he reminded her of, but in his presence she felt haunted—increasingly so as the years brought a still closer resemblance to the man whose love had made him.

She sometimes asked herself what she should have done if Lawrie had, as seemed inevitable when she married Toby, come back to live at Bewbush Manor after the war. She would have had to persuade her husband to settle as far as possible from his home and the countryside they both loved, which would not have been an easy matter. Even as things were, had Lawrie come often into the district some sharp eyes might have noticed the likeness between him and Bernard. But heaven had been good to her—and Toby—in this matter. He had scarcely appeared near his old home since his marriage. At first he had lived hypochondriacally in the neighbourhood of his sister at Angmering; then he had become restless in the pursuit of health and gone on voyages to the Indies, to the Amazon, to Hayti, Oceana. . . . At last, much better but not entirely cured, he and his long-suffering wife had settled in Northumberland. He seemed anxious to put as much of England as possible between him and the dream that like himself had become a casualty of war.

Tea at Pyramus was at five o'clock, but this afternoon Toby did not come in till nearly six. Myra was glad to have him to herself—with Susie back again with Mrs. Perkins in the barn. Her quiet chats at meal-times with her husband were the comforts of the day and all the more comfortable for being free of her daughter's sharp yet vulnerable ears.

"Well, what have you been doing this afternoon?"

"I was in the Polthooks field most of the time, taking a turn with the rake. Then I went over to Copstreet to see Reeves and called in at Beathope's for some tobacco. What have you been doing, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing . . . just tidying things up a bit round here and helping Strudgate clean the chicken-houses. And I rang up Sibylla."

"How is she?"

"Oh, quite all right, she seems—poor old dear! I asked her to come out on Saturday. I can drive her back with me, you know, when I go into Marlingate for the shopping."

"I shall be glad to see her after all this time. Is she staying for the week-end?"

"No. I asked her, but she refused. She doesn't like being away from home. I've never been able to get her even to come for Christmas."

"Queer, isn't it? You'd think she'd hate to spend Christmas by herself."

"Oh, she goes to church a lot, you know, and we can't give her much of that round her. And she's got Violet Faircloth."

"How she can endure that woman—"

"That's what I can't imagine. But of course they've been friends almost from her school-days. I'm glad she's got somebody from the old days living in the town, for most of her contemporaries seem to have left, and it must be very lonely for her—especially now."

"She has no thought of leaving the place herself, I suppose."

"Not she! It would take something more than Hitler's threats to get her out of Monypenny Crescent."

"She's a game old girl, and I think she's right. The southeast coast isn't going to be the pleasantest place in England this summer; but unless invasion's really imminent it seems a pity to tear up one's roots and try to plant oneself among strangers."

"That's how you feel about it," said Myra with a smile, "but a great many people don't. And Sibylla wouldn't be among strangers. Kitty would have her at Cumberbatch, in spite of her disliking Howard so much (as we all do, for that matter), or Georgie could take her at Cressington, though she doesn't like Tom either."

"She's very choosy about brothers-in-law, it seems. Am I her reason for refusing to stay here?"

"Oh, no—she highly approves of you. It's only that she doesn't like staying away from home; and I haven't pressed it as a measure of safety, because if there really is trouble in the south-east I doubt if she'd be much better off here than at home, and she'd feel much worse. By the way, it's just struck six. Do you want to listen to the news?"

"No, thanks; I heard it at one, and anything fresh can keep till

after supper. I don't myself feel at all sure that Hitler will risk a direct attack on this country. It would be a tough proposition even for him."

"I don't see that. After all, we left practically all our stuff in France; if he comes quickly he'll find us almost unarmed."

"He should have come directly after Dunkirk," said Toby coolly; "but by this time, with our factories working like hell, I reckon that we've caught up with ourselves a bit. You're not feeling windy about it, are you, dear?"

"Lord, no!" said Myra stoutly, realizing that she could not acknowledge fear even to Toby. "I feel like someone in a fortress which had just let down the portcullis and pulled up the drawbridge."

"I'm glad; for in my opinion there's been too much wind-up round here. Some people in this part of the fortress seem to have forgotten the moat. I'm sick of being told that there's only forty miles between us and the German Army, as if thirty of 'em weren't sea. By the way I met Tomsett today in Copstreet and he told me that the Sheldrakes are leaving Bewbush Manor and Buckrose's sister is coming to live there."

"His sister? Which?—why?"

"The one who lives at Angmering—I forget her name. Apparently the Sheldrakes had the power to terminate their lease this summer, and not liking the look of things they did so. I suppose she's coming because they could never let the place to anyone else, and anyway it will be her eldest boy's after Buckrose is gone."

"I see," said Myra dully.

"I'm surprised he doesn't want to come and live there himself, now he's got the chance."

"Well, apparently he hasn't yet recovered from the effects of the last war. So it's better for him to stay where he's not so likely to get involved in this one."

"Perhaps so. And of course it might be painful for him to look round and see all his estate in other hands—us here, for instance."

"Yes; he used to think a lot of Pyramus. He had an idea he might come and live here himself after the war."

"Had he, indeed? He told you that, did he? I don't believe he'd ever have done it. It wouldn't have suited him at all—not nearly big and grand enough."

"He'd have spent a lot of money, I expect, on what he thought were improvements."

"And ruined himself even worse than he actually did. That would have been just like the Buckroses, the sort of thing that's brought them such a cropper. They were always spending money on 'improvements' that didn't matter. I hope you won't ever let me lose my head that way, my dear."

"You're not likely to," said Myra. She still spoke in a flat, uninterested voice which made him change the subject.

That night she lay awake, at lately had become her habit. Toby did not know of these vigils. He lay at her side quietly sleeping from almost the moment of their early bed-time till she herself woke him for their early rising. She was glad he did not know, for she felt ashamed of allowing herself to be bullied by her anxieties out of their surest means of assuagement. But every night, as the sky darkened over Maidenbower and the white road on the hill faded into the shadows of Haneholz's Wood, her fears seemed to come out and ride her as witches of old were said to ride farmers' horses, leaving them sweating and exhausted in the morning light. By day she felt stout enough—even thrilled, as she had said, standing on the castle wall and gazing defiantly across the moat at the enemy's array. But at night she lay in a dark, beleagured island, close to a vulnerable coast, relying for her defence on a disarmed and defeated army, a scattered navy, a partially trained air-force, and on politicians who had already proved their ineptitude.

It seemed to her in those hours as if unconscionably soon she and those she loved best must be devoured. The foe that had so swiftly eaten up France would now turn and as quickly eat up Britain. The present lull was merely while he reorganized and redirected himself, as he had reorganized and redirected himself after Dunkirk. The invincible, impregnable country had fallen, the voice that had cried at Verdun "*debout les morts!*" had been strangled into surrender by tears of pity for the murdered little ones . . . forty thousand children killed on the roads and in the cities of France. Her heart seemed to turn over as she thought of Susie, and then to leap with rage at Toby for the very calmness and stolidity that in daylight she had found so reassuring. . . . By this time the corner of the sheet would generally be in her mouth, *stifling* her sobs, while the tears welled out of the corners of her eyes and wetted her pillow.

But tonight her thoughts were on another tack, and a different sort

of fear kept her awake. Toby's news about Bewbush had given her only a little concern at the time, but now, in the distraction and disproportion of darkness, it had become monstrous and overwhelmed all other shadows.

What threat, exactly, lay in the fact of his sister living so near? She realized that she would be obliged to know and visit her, as she had known and visited the Sheldrakes. What chance was there of meeting Lawrie? He was fond of his sister—he had spent much of his time with her at Angmering; no doubt he would come to stay with her when she was living in his old home. She must school herself at least to the chance of meeting him again, and after all it was ridiculous to dread meeting a man one had loved so many years ago, whom one would have forgotten almost completely but for the token of himself that he had left behind. . . .

. . . The threat was there—in Bernard. She did not want Lawrie to meet Bernard. In those night hours she pictured their meeting as a terrible thing—something like Rossetti's picture of *How They Met Themselves*. She was convinced that each would immediately see himself in the other, either shuddering or threatening. She told herself in vain that such a meeting was unlikely—a lump of coincidences that could only be the fruit of an ex-novelist's imagination. She could not help lying awake on the chance that Lawrie should come to visit his sister at Bewbush at the same time as Bernard came home on leave—tossing and stewing just because of the link re-forged between this man and this place. . . . Why should the thought of Lawrie at Bewbush have become more terrifying than the thought of Hitler at Boulogne? It was all irrational and ridiculous. She felt more ashamed of herself for lying awake with such fears than for harbouring those others that she shut away in daylight . . . already her heart was beating like a drum, thudding so loud against her side that it seemed as if it must wake Toby. But she had no tears for this private misery.

“Mummy . . .”

The cry came faintly through the connecting door, and immediately Myra was out of bed, catching up her wrapper and padding on bare feet into the next room, where Susie slept.

“What is it, darling—what is it, my baby? I'm here.”

“Oh, Mummy . . .”

The little girl was sitting up in bed, and as Myra's arm came round her, the trembling of her body shook them both.

"What is it? What's frightened you, my pet? Wait a minute while I go and put up the black-out. Then I'll light the candle."

Susie was not often frightened at night, and it struck Myra that perhaps Connie—latest Lusted to wait upon a Landless—might have told her some foolish tale while she was giving her her bath. She found it almost impossible to stop the farm-people from enjoying a wallow in their own fears in front of the child.

"I don't mind about the candle, Mummy; I'd rather you stayed and held me. There's a ghost in Haneholt's Wood."

"A ghost! . . . Oh, Susie, you foolish one!" She kissed the top of her head, relieved to have so slight and silly a matter to deal with. "I've told you so many times—there isn't such a thing."

"But, Mummy, there is—I heard it crying. There it is again."

A low cry seemed to float through the starlight towards the house.

"That's only an owl."

"Are you sure? It doesn't sound like an owl to me."

"It's a young owl—a fledgling. I've often heard them cry out just like that."

It cried again, and the note certainly had about it a queer melancholy that seemed to come from another world. Susie turned her head and hid her face in her mother's shoulder.

"Oh, Mummy, I don't like it."

"Never mind, pet. It sounds ghostly because everything else is so still—you wouldn't notice it if the other birds were singing."

"Do you think it will stop?"

"It's sure to."

"Mummy, do you have to go away this dreckly minute?"

Myra laughed.

"No, I don't. I'll get into bed with you and stay till you've gone to sleep again. I know what you want, you little humbug."

She slid into the bed, drawing the child with her under the blankets. The trembling ceased.

"Mummy, do you think I'm silly to be afraid of ghosts?"

"Very silly—considering there's no such thing."

But as she lay there she realized that if Susie was silly, she was much sillier; for what had she been afraid of all these wakeful hours but a ghost? Lawrie was dead, without power to hurt her any more.

Why should she lie awake in fear of what was only the voice of memory, calling like an owl in the wood—a voice she would scarcely notice by day, when her thoughts were full of other sounds? . . . She fell asleep as quickly as the child.

### III

**I**T was the middle of July before any bombs fell on Marlingate. Till then there had been only a slow increase in the tempo of emergency. Indeed, for some weeks the south-east coast had been quieter than during the Battle of France. At that time its danger had been audible in the approach of gunfire—as in the days of the last war, when the barrages of Vimy and Bapaume throbbed on the air above Winter Land and Ellenwhorne. But gradually the noise had increased from a pulse to a mutter, from a mutter to a roar, till at last, as the fight raged round the Channel Ports, it had been possible to distinguish the various notes of an explosive orchestra of bombs, heavy guns, light guns, anti-aircraft guns, pom-poms and the turreted monsters of naval craft at sea—a whole invisible battle broadcast in sound. Then after Dunkirk had come silence, followed by a fainter resumption on the Somme, so that in the end France fell in a stillness that might have been the stillness of her own grave.

After that the main activity (to judge only by what could be heard and seen) was on the English side of the Channel, as the Home Guard struggled into being and country roads were barricaded with broken-down cars and disused farm-carts, while the towns and villages filled up with troops, the beaches disappeared behind coils of barbed wire and sappers blew up all the Palace Piers, so that at least the Germans should not land like trippers.

By that time the inhabitants of Marlingate had come to know a new sound, a sound which was soon to become sinisterly familiar not only to them but to the inhabitants of most of the country. Nazi reconnaissance planes had flown at intervals over the coast almost from the days of Dunkirk. At first they dropped no bombs, then they made attacks on shipping and finally on the land—queer random assaults on the open countryside, involving a number of craters in fields and bunches of uprooted trees that might have been torn out of the ground by a giant's fist.

But so far they had ignored Marlingate, and Sibylla had begun to hope that they might continue to ignore it, when a sudden huge concussion broke off her argument with Violet Faircloth and made her throw her coffee-cup in the air.

It was not her own coffee-cup, but Mrs. Brown's, for she and Violet were having a cup of morning coffee together in Brown's shop—a treat they indulged in more often now that Joyce Yeoveney was gone. Perhaps Violet had been right in feeling jealous of her, for certainly Sibylla seemed to want her old friend's company much more now than in the days when the young one was available. The two old ladies could be seen most mornings walking together in High Street or sitting in Brown's—two tall, imposing figures whose clothes still suggested the fashions of their own hey-day in high-collared blouses and many ornamented chains, long skirts and coils of hair that tilted their hats over their eyes.

Violet had just expressed her satisfaction in this new state of affairs, and it was the inevitable controversy that followed (combined with the military band to which Brown's had tuned in their wireless) which had prevented them hearing those sounds that had already drawn many of the inhabitants of Marlingate into the streets and driven certain others of a different temperament under the stairs.

"It used to puzzle me, to think what you could find to like so much in a girl of her age—a girl who isn't even a lady."

"Joyce is certainly a lady. I don't understand you, Violet."

"My dear Sibylla, you know as well as I do that her mother's quite impossible."

"Her mother may be, but I always found her a most refined girl as well as a most delightful one."

"There you are, talking about 'refined,' just as she would. I simply can't think how you don't notice what's wrong."

"Perhaps I do notice," said Sibylla stoutly, "but I don't care."

"Then all I can say is that I think it's a pity. After all, you and I are almost the only ones left of the old families of Marlingate. It seems a pity that we shouldn't find our interests and companionships in our own set, instead of looking for them among newcomers whom nobody knows anything about."

"But Joyce was always so kind and helpful. I can't tell you how I miss her."

"Well, of course if what you want is someone to mend your clothes

and run errands, I confess I'm getting past it. But I should have thought you'd need a more—er—intellectual companionship than a half-educated little thing like her could give."

"I don't know what you mean by half-educated. I should think her education compared very well with either of ours. I can't remember ever having learned anything much at school."

At that moment the bomb fell—some streets away, but startling enough to those who had never heard a bomb before. Sibylla's coffee-cup nearly hit the ceiling, and Violet, also rising, came down only partly on her chair. After that there was a certain amount of agitation, while the two waitresses and the cashier rushed out to see what was happening, leaving Sibylla and Violet alone in the shop, for Brown's did not do much business now. They would both have liked to go out too, but were restrained partly by nervousness and partly by the thought that they had not paid for their coffee.

"I've half a mind to go without paying," said Violet in a loud, indignant voice.

"We can't do that," said Sibylla, also in a loud, indignant voice (which for some reason was easier to control than a normal one). If this was indeed to be her last moment, she would much rather not enter another world immediately after robbing Brown's of five-pence.

"I don't see why not. They've no business to run away and leave us alone like this."

"We could leave the money on the table."

It was then that another bomb fell, farther off but still disquieting.

"I think perhaps we're best off where we are," said Sibylla.

"I believe they're shelling the town from the sea," said Violet. "Those bangs didn't sound like bombs to me."

"They did to me," said Sibylla. "Besides, the Germans haven't got a navy."

"They've got destroyers and at least one pocket battleship. That's what's happening, I'm sure."

"In that case we're in a very dangerous position right on the sea-front. But I'm sure that wasn't naval gunfire."

"If it was a 'plane, why wasn't there an air-raid warning?"

"Perhaps there was, but we didn't hear it. The wireless was on, you know."

At that moment the waitresses and the cashier came back, having

ascertained that Fish Street was in ruins and the Totty Lands Waterworks had been put out of action. Apparently Sibylla was right about the 'plane, which had now flown away out to sea. There had been no air-raid warning and everyone was highly indignant about it.

Later, more authentic accounts of the damage confined it to a net-maker's hut on the Stade and a garden at the back of Mount Idle. A number of windows had been broken, but nobody had been hurt. It all seemed rather an anti-climax, but comforting to Sibylla—if only Violet would stop hinting at darker things to come.

In this case Violet was right. The Germans had apparently discovered Marlingate and came back there several times in the course of the next few weeks. Their 'planes, sometimes in twos or threes but more often singly, would suddenly dive out of the clouds or come skimming through the Channel haze. They would circle over the roofs almost at chimney level—displaying their ugly swastikas to such of the townsfolk who still remained in the streets or at their windows—and then, after, perhaps, a burst of machine-gun fire, drop their bombs as they flew away; sometimes apparently at random, sometimes revealing their target by clotted positions round the station, the waterworks or the gasworks. Later on the wireless would suavely report that enemy aircraft had visited the south-east coast, dropping bombs on a town and causing a few casualties.

The bombs were not heavy ones—seldom more, in fact, than fifty-pounders—and did not as a rule destroy more than one building at a time; but before very long the town began to show its scars. A number of houses had disappeared in Station Road and one or two in High Street; the Paragon Cinema, to which Sibylla used to take Joyce Yeoveney for a treat, was now an ugly ruin like a broken tooth, and the French Gun Inn had received a direct hit, removing one of the most familiar landmarks of her life—the 'bus stop at which she had always alighted for Monypenny Crescent. For a time its disappearance seemed even to affect the integrity of the High Street 'bus and added to her growing reluctance to go down into the town.

The shopping walk down High Street had for many years been one of her most satisfying pleasures. Loitering at familiar windows, entering doors which she had entered many hundreds of times, to be greeted and served by tradesmen whose predecessors if not them-

selves had served her parents, gave her a feeling of being at home, in her own town, among her own people. Here was Pinckney's window, Pinckney who had made her coats and skirts ever since she had left school, linking her present appearance with that more pleasing one of days gone by . . . old Mr. Pinckney, dead now for fifteen years, had once called her Miss Juno and said he wished everybody had a figure so easy to fit. Here was Budgen's, where she had shopped for dear Mother during the last war, hunting for disappearing delicacies, returning in triumph with a cauliflower or a pound of potatoes or half a dozen eggs. Here was Banks the stationer's—no Bankses left now, but a very pleasant son-in-law, who never forgot that the family had supplied Number Four Monypenny Crescent with its daily paper since 1889. And here was Brown's, with its dummy wedding-cake in the window and a score of little polished tables in the room behind the shop, linking up an old lady's morning coffee with a schoolgirl's ices.

The dark side of these memories had long been lost. She never met in High Street a hurrying figure blind with tears—a girl who snatched despairingly at the years as they passed without bringing her love—a middle-aged woman driven into frantic childishness by her mother's baiting. . . . Even if she had met these ghosts they might not have disquieted her; for they too were a part of herself, a part of the extension of herself in time as High Street, as Monypenny Crescent, as the whole town, were a part of the extension of herself in space. They too were passengers in the High Street 'bus, which as it brought her home to luncheon seemed to make a comfortable little circle of eternity.

In losing these walks into the town she seemed to lose much of herself, to contract into the shell of her own body and the present time. Yet she shrank from the experience that they threatened and sometimes involved—sudden alarms, shouts of Take Cover, as the dark birds swooped on the unwarned streets (once a total stranger had dragged her into the gutter and lain on the top of her, tearing ladders in her stockings and covering her skirts with mud), or else the long, bellowing wail of the siren, causing a more dignified absorption into the bowels of Pinckney's, Budgen's or Brown's. After one or two such adventures Sibylla decided to do her shopping through the telephone.

She and Violet now preferred to meet for morning coffee in each

other's houses and took their morning walk on the empty pavements of Pelham Square or Becket Grove. New Marlingate seemed to them more secure than the Old Town—an idea which must have been based on their memories of days when both brawls and infectious diseases seemed to stop short of those select Palladian fronts. Actually, it had received its share of bombs and was considerably less well equipped with shelters than either High Street or the Parade; but at least one was in no danger of being pushed into the gutter or down a coal-hole (as had actually happened to Rosalind Pym-Barrett on one dreadful occasion) by unappreciated knight-errants. Besides, it had the supreme advantage of being near home—a brief scurry on legs unaccustomed to running and one had all the comfort and protection of beloved objects and familiar surroundings.

Sibylla no longer had Norma as her maid. The girl had left to marry her boy-friend, who was now a munition worker in Swindon, earning eight pounds a week. She would not have regretted her loss except for the difficulty of finding a successor; but here Marlingate's fate became unexpectedly her friend. The town, in common with Hastings, Eastbourne, Folkestone and other seaside neighbours, had been made what the newspapers called a Banned Area, which meant that the last of the almost empty boarding-houses that had so far managed to keep open were forced to shut down, and from one of these Joyce Yeoveney, returning on forty-eight hours' leave, managed to extract, with her accustomed dexterity in such matters, a little servant. Minnie was only seventeen and not quite "all there," but she was a hard and patient worker, and once shown how to do anything—make a pie or polish a table—could be trusted to go on doing it in exactly the same way even though the heavens fell. She took no notice of sirens, or even bombs—unless they were very near. Sibylla felt more strongly than ever that she was safest and best-off at home.

She had enjoyed seeing Joyce, looking very smart though uncomfortable in her hot, thick uniform. The girl, indeed, had spent most of her leave in Monypenny Crescent, starting Minnie on her career, and attending to the defects of Sibylla's wardrobe. It was like a return to more tranquil days, except that they did not go to the cinema. But before she left, Joyce became disquieting.

"I really should feel much happier, Miss Landless, if I didn't have to think of you here all by yourself."

"But I'm not all by myself. I've got Minnie, thanks to you, dear."

"I don't mean that. I mean I still wish you would go and stay with one of your sisters—Mrs. Lintine or Mrs. Hardcastle or even Mrs. Street."

"They've all asked me," said Sibylla proudly, "but I really don't feel inclined to leave home at present."

"I wish you would. I mean—everyone seems to think the invasion must come soon, and if it does it's going to be bad for you here. You remember what Mr. Churchill said about fighting them on the beaches. . . . I don't think it's right for an elderly lady, if you'll excuse me, to live bang in the front line."

Sibylla felt her heart shiver—and then suddenly beat fast with a new sort of pride. She was in the front line—a soldier's daughter, a soldier herself.

"And very glad I am to be in it. I saw very little of the last war, and absolutely nothing of the one before it. If I'm to go on living in wars like this I'm glad at last to have been given a chance to do my own bit of fighting."

But Joyce would not allow any sabre-rattling on the part of her elderly friend.

"I don't think you ought to, Miss Landless. I mean, if there really was an invasion, I'm afraid, if you'll excuse me saying it, you'd only get in the way."

"Well, if the Germans actually came I should go, of course, but I don't want to leave unless I'm obliged to. I'd only worry if I was far away in Shropshire or the Midlands. I've been quite all right here so far—I don't go out much. And as for being alone, I've got Miss Faircloth. I see her almost every day."

"But she says she's looking for a furnished house in Oxfordshire."

"I know she says she is—but I don't suppose she'll ever do anything more about it. She hasn't even written to the house agent yet."

Violet was always thinking of some new scheme for leaving Marlingate—some friend to join or place to go to. But she never went, and Sibylla had now ceased to pay much attention to her announcements of imminent departure. In this instance she quickly changed her mind. She said she had heard that Oxford was so full that all the shops were emptied by midday; whereas in Marlingate the shopkeepers had more on their hands than they could get rid of. Of course there were the bombs . . . but Mrs. Budgen had been so nice to her that time she was caught, bringing her a cup of tea in the cellar,

that it had really been quite a pleasant experience—especially as that time the 'planes had not come to Marlingate at all, but had dropped their bombs on Eastbourne.

Sibylla was very fond of her nephew, Bernard Street. She liked him much better than Kitty's boy Michael—a boy no longer save in her thoughts of him, but a married man who had made her a great-aunt some years ago. Poor Michael had been a prisoner in Germany since Dunkirk, but though Sibylla had already written to him and would no doubt soon be denying herself in order to send him parcels through the Red Cross, she could not pretend that she felt much sorrow or anxiety, such as she would have felt for Bernard in his place. She had seen very little of Michael, but she had watched Bernard grow up from babyhood into the good-looking young man he was now. As a schoolboy she had given him treats, her affection surviving even that barbarous period when he used his mouth for very little except eating. As a young man she had been thrilled when he in his turn had given her treats, calling for her in Monypenny Crescent and taking her out to lunch at the Marine Hotel—it had made her feel quite young again, and how was she to know that the idea was all his mother's?

Myra had promised to let her know when he came home on leave, so that she could go out to Pyramus and see him, and Sibylla would have been very angry with her had she failed to do so. None the less she felt disquieted when one morning her sister rang up to tell her that the young man was home on a fortnight's sick-leave after an unseasonable attack of influenza, and to suggest that she should come out for the day, or, better still, for the week-end—experiencing much the same conflict between nervousness and desire that she felt on Sunday when it was time to go to church.

"Of course the Copstreet 'bus does still run as usual," she said uncertainly.

"Oh, yes; they told me only the other day that they have plenty of petrol for all their services."

"I wasn't thinking of petrol. . . . Still, I'll come. If I don't come, you'll know there's been an air-raid. I shouldn't be able to ring up and tell you, because the 'phone goes off whenever there's a warning."

"My dear, don't dream of coming if you don't feel like it. Perhaps you'd rather Bernard came in to see you? But I'm afraid it couldn't be

till next week, because he really has been very ill, poor boy, and isn't fit to go about much yet."

"Oh no, I wouldn't dream of asking him to come here. It isn't at all the sort of place for . . . I'll come out to Pyramus. What day would suit you best?"

"Any day—we're always at home. Come tomorrow. It's ages since you've been to see us."

"Yes, I know . . . I want to see you all. I'll come tomorrow by the ten-o'clock 'bus."

"Won't you stop for a few days? We'd love to have you, and I think it would do you good."

"Oh no, thanks; I must get home."

"But why?"

"I really must. I don't like leaving only the girl in the house."

Experience must have taught Myra that it was useless to pursue this argument, for all she said was:

"Very well; we'll expect you tomorrow morning. It will be lovely."

Sibylla was not so sure. She could not quite understand Myra's attitude. She was always trying to persuade her to leave Marlingate and go to stay with either Kitty or Georgie; but she was incomprehensibly light-hearted about what she did while she remained there. She did not seem to see any special danger in going out and catching the Copstreet 'bus when there might be an air-raid at any moment. She herself drove boldly into the town to do her shopping, and perhaps that was why she did not realize what a venture her sister was making in coming out to Pyramus.

From her drawing-room window—the room that used to be dear Mother's bedroom—Sibylla could see the Copstreet 'bus coming down the London Road in the valley below. This gave her the advantage of leaving home only just before it reached its terminus opposite the ruins of the French Gun, so that she did not have to wait about in the street—a bait for Nazi aeroplanes—but was almost immediately on her way out of the town.

It was a fine sunny day—how few days had not been fine and sunny that fateful summer!—and when the 'bus had climbed without misfortune out of the town and was jogging along the course of Marlingate's "ribbon development"—a dreary extension of itself in

small houses and untidy bungalows towards the nearest village of Marlpost—she found that she had begun to enjoy herself in a tentative sort of way. It would be nice to see Myra and Toby and Susie and Bernard—the four of them made up her favourite among her sisters' families. In fact it might be said that they were the only one of her sisters' families that she at all approved of. She must always disapprove of Kitty and Howard, because though they were no longer living in sin, that was not due to any repentance or reformation on their part but merely to circumstances, poor Hugh Spellman having died in 1924. In the case of Georgie and Tom the disapproval had a less clear source in a sump of painful memories, but expressed itself mainly in the observation that since his marriage Tom had become lamentably "moderate" in his ecclesiastical views.

The Streets, however, gave no such offence. Myra had not sinned in marrying Toby and Toby as Myra's husband did not offer any insult to her memories. As for their children, they were both good children, though she infinitely preferred Bernard. Her spirits rose when, as the 'bus drove into Copstreet, she caught sight of him waiting for her in the little thatched shelter at the 'bus stop.

Someone from Pyramus nearly always met her in the village to drive her or walk with her the rest of the way; but after Myra's account of him she had not expected to see Bernard. That he should be there proclaimed a degree of devotion that was highly gratifying to his aunt.

"You really shouldn't have come," she said as she alighted. "I'm afraid it must have tired you." She noticed that he had not come forward to help her off the 'bus.

Then suddenly she saw that it was not Bernard, but a much older man. How could she have made such a silly mistake? . . . she really ought to see about getting those new glasses . . . it must have been the red hair that had deceived her. . . . "I beg your pardon—just for a moment I took you for my nephew. I beg your pardon."

The stranger smiled and raised his hat; and just at that moment, while she was still blushing, Myra drove up in her noisy old car, with the real Bernard in the back seat.

"Hullo, Auntie! Here we are at last."

"Sibylla, my dear, I'm so sorry—I meant to be here in time; but so many things happened just as I was leaving."

She opened the door for Sibylla to get in beside her, and at the same time the stranger came forward.

"It's Myra, isn't it?—Myra Street?"

"Yes. . . . Oh, Lawrie—I didn't recognize you for a minute."

"Well, it's a long time since we met."

Then suddenly Sibylla recognized the man she had mistaken for Bernard. She had not seen him since he was quite a boy; she had known his father much better. But now she saw how very like he was to his father as well as—she still thought so now that she saw them together—her nephew Bernard.

She said:

"I believe I used to know your father years ago. You're Mr. Lawrence Buckrose, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's who I am—and you are Miss Sibylla Landless?—or is it Miss Georgie?"

"No; Georgie is married and lives in Bedfordshire. I still live in Marlingate. Have you come back to live at Bewbush Manor?"

"No; I'm only staying there with my sister for a few days. My home's in Northumberland."

"You really are astonishingly like your father—perhaps that's what made me take you for my nephew. I mean, I felt sure I recognized you as you stood there."

"I've always been told I'm like my father," said Mr. Buckrose. "I believe there's a strong family likeness." He was looking at Bernard. "Is this your eldest boy, Myra?"

"My only boy—he's in the Green Howards, but on leave at the moment . . . and now we really must be getting home. I promised Thorne I'd help with the calves."

Mr. Buckrose said:

"I wonder if you'd be good enough to give a lift as far as Duckreed Corner. My leg has let me down again—I'm a casualty of the war to end all wars," he added, addressing Bernard, "and I was waiting about in hopes of a 'bus, but they don't seem much more frequent now than they were in the old days."

"They aren't," said Myra shortly, "and of course we can easily run you home. Sibylla, would you like to move to the back and sit beside Bernard and Mr. Buckrose can come and sit by me."

Sibylla, who was already comfortably settled and very much dis-

liked getting in and out of cars, felt relieved when Mr. Buckrose firmly opened the back door and took the empty seat.

"I can talk to you from here," he said. "It seems a pity to disturb Miss Landless."

Myra started the car and they drove off. Sibylla thought she seemed annoyed or depressed about something. Perhaps she was thinking of the old days when, according to Kitty, Lawrence Buckrose had loved her and wanted to marry her. She surely could not be regretting that she had refused him for Toby. . . . However, they had not gone far before she recovered her spirits and chatted in quite an animated way with Mr. Buckrose, asking him how long he was staying with his sister and making enquiries about his wife and his home. She drove him, as Sibylla had expected, all the way to the Manor House, which was about a mile beyond Duckreed Corner; but she refused his invitation to them all to come indoors and have a glass of sherry.

"Thanks very much, but I really must get back—we're dreadfully short-handed at the moment, and I have a number of young calves."

"Perhaps you'll come another day—and bring this young man and your sister."

"Yes; thank you very much. I'll ring up when I find I can get away," and she drove off, while Sibylla was still explaining that she herself would not be able to accept his kind invitation, as she was going back to Marlingate that evening.

They had barely passed the lodge gates before Bernard asked:

"Who on earth is that bounder?"

Myra was silent for so long that Sibylla thought she could not have heard him; then she said:

"He's the man who used to own almost half the parish before the last war. Surely you know all about him."

"Wasn't he gassed or something?"

"Yes; he was badly wounded in nineteen-eighteen. I haven't seen anything of him since then; it was sharp of him to recognize me."

"What's he doing here now?"

"I suppose he's come to see his sister and have a look at Bewbush now the Sheldrakes are gone. I don't think he ever means to come and live here again."

"Well, nobody wants him to—I thought him an awful blighter. You won't let me in for going to Bewbush, will you, Mother?"

"No fear—I'm not going there either; but of course I couldn't say so."

"I thought his father was a very nice man," said Sibylla, feeling that Myra and Bernard were being rather unfair to Mr. Buckrose. "I used to dance with him at the Marlingate balls in the old days. He's astonishingly like him. And it's a funny thing, Bernard, but I still think he's like you—I mean, I don't think I was silly in taking him for you when I saw him in the distance at the 'bus stop."

"I don't think he's like Bernard in the very least," said Myra firmly; "it's only that they've both got red hair and you were expecting Bernard to meet you."

"I wasn't expecting Bernard at all. I was never more surprised in my life than when I thought I saw him standing there. I'd gathered from you that he was much too ill to go out."

"And so I am, Auntie; but Mother's a great believer in fresh air, especially when it's full of machine-gun bullets. By the way, how are you enjoying the air-raids? Do you get a good view of them in Marlingate?"

Myra had lied when she told Lawrie Buckrose that she had not recognized him. She had recognized him almost before she stopped the car, and had done her best to make Sibylla get in quickly and drive off before he could see them. But Sibylla had been too slow or he had been too smart and she had even been forced into the embarrassment of having to drive him home. She had been unable to persuade him to sit beside her, but had had to let him sit beside Bernard with every opportunity of studying the resemblance which Sibylla had already proclaimed. It had been only for a few minutes and she had done her best to distract him with talk and questions, but the whole episode had made her uneasy.

There was of course a chance that it was finished. She had told him she would ring him up, and naturally she would do nothing of the kind. In that case was it probable that he himself would make a move? She did not believe it. He would not wish to force himself upon her after all that had happened long ago; and even if he had had his suspicions aroused he was not likely to want to confirm them. Indeed, the chance was a strong probability. . . . She was a fool to worry so much. Nevertheless, she could not get the occurrence out of her mind, and spent the rest of the day in an anxiety which ex-

pressed itself in irritation—an irritation she found it hard not to vent on Sibylla, who was the unwitting cause of it all.

By the time she had finally seen her off in the evening 'bus she was in a state bordering on exasperation. Her sister's courage had become obstinacy, her fears had become ridiculous, her affection for them all a nuisance, the very monumental sight of her in her high corsets and heavy hat an affront and a distress.

"Oh, dear," she said at supper, "how exhausting one's nearest and dearest can be."

"Meaning me?" asked Bernard, "or Dad?"

"Meaning your Aunt Sibylla." Alone with those two she could let herself go; it was a relief, a release like taking off one's stays. "I'm very fond of her—she's always been very good to me—but somehow we don't seem to have a thing in common. It isn't only our interests that are different—it's our whole attitude towards everything. I don't see Kitty and Georgie nearly so often, and yet we understand one another much better. Perhaps it's because we're married and she's single—though I don't see why that should make such a difference."

"I don't know," said Toby; "it must be very bad for a woman to be always alone."

"I wish she wouldn't *be* alone," said Myra crossly. "I wish she'd go and stay with Kitty or Georgie; they've both written and asked her. But nothing will induce her to leave that ghastly hole which is getting to look more and more like a second-hand furniture shop. I used to think it brave of her once, but now it annoys me, because she has no real reason for staying."

"Perhaps her home has taken the place of the husband and children she's never had," said Toby, surprising her as he sometimes did with a sympathetic penetration deeper than her own.

"She'd get damnably in the way if there was an invasion," said Bernard.

"Yes, she would; so it would be only patriotic of her to clear out of the front line—which is a point of view I never can get her to see. I used to think she wasn't frightened, but she is—in a petty, fussy sort of way. She's full of grievances about air-raids interfering with her shopping and the siren always going too late; and this afternoon it was all blah-blah-blah about not having any anti-aircraft guns in Marlingate. I ask you . . . after Dunkirk . . . the country

almost totally disarmed and even the big cities with scarcely any flak . . . yet she seems to think it's someone's duty to make a decayed seaside resort safe for old ladies to do their shopping in and enjoy their morning coffee. . . . I had to listen to a lot about how disagreeable it is now at Brown's."

"Poor Sibylla," said Toby with his slow, friendly smile. "She seems to have annoyed you."

Myra felt a little ashamed of herself, but Bernard said:

"I don't wonder; she's a tiresome old geezer. Would you believe it, Dad?—she thinks I'm exactly like that chap Buckrose who used to live at Bewbush. She actually accosted him at the 'bus stop, thinking he was me."

Myra had got what she deserved for taking off her stays at Sibylla's expense.

"Buckrose?" asked Toby. "Is he back here, then?"

She said hastily:

"Yes; he's staying with his sister for a day or two. We spoke to him at the 'bus stop and then drove him home afterwards."

"Is he all right again now?"

"He seemed fairly well, except for his leg, which he said was still troubling him."

"Poor chap! I feel sorry for him, though I never really liked him. Perhaps I was a bit jealous"—and he smiled at Myra—"I dare say I should like him better if I saw him now."

"I don't think you would," said Bernard. "I didn't. I mean I didn't like the looks of him, and I'm not sure that I oughtn't to feel insulted by Aunt Sibylla having mistaken him for me."

"She's as blind as a bat," said Myra. "You really needn't worry so much about what she thought she saw."

"But she went on about it so—even after she'd seen us both together."

Toby was looking critically at the boy.

"I'm not sure. . . . It's odd, dear, but from what I remember of Lawrie Buckrose—and it must be least twenty years since I set eyes on him—there does seem to be a likeness between him and Bernard."

"Oh, Dad! . . . you too! . . ."

Myra hid her shaking hands under the table.

"There isn't any resemblance at all that I can see," she said in a

voice she tried hard to keep indifferent. "How could there be? It's only that they've both got red hair."

"I wonder if *he's* got a double crown," said Bernard. "You've no idea what a nuisance it is and how I hate whatever unknown ancestor it was that wished it on me."

"It's an unaccountable thing," said Toby, "that you ever came to have red hair at all. Only the other day, my dear, Mother was saying that Aunt Nellie had told her it isn't true that Great-uncle William had it, as we thought. It was very light chestnut, almost corn-coloured, but never really red."

Myra thought that she had been punished enough for her unkindness to Sibylla.

"I'm going out," she said, "to shut up the chicken. It's nearly dark."

"Let me do it," said Toby.

He was always unselfishly willing to add to his labours in order to reduce hers.

"No; you've done quite enough today and I shall enjoy a breath of fresh air. You stay here and talk to Bernard."

She left the room without looking back, because it hurt her to see them sitting so happily together.

The lamplight in the house behind her had not yet become a crime against the realm; it was only the mists that had brought an early night to the Tillingham Valley. She walked slowly to the little orchard where long years ago Lawrie Buckrose had kissed her and won her uneasy promise. It had changed very little since that day, for all the new plantings had been made in the sheltered enclosure down by Furnace Wood. Here stood only the old trees, gnarled and twisted by the weather of forty years, their boughs lacing thin strings of shadow over the chicken-houses.

She did not hurry over her task, for she loved that peaceful hour between day and darkness, when all the sky might have been a high grey cloud except for the occasional prick of stars. When she had shut the arks she went into the field beyond the orchard and stood listening. In all the air there was not a sound of war. So far there had been little activity at night, and now not even a searchlight hunted the crescent moon into the west and the only sounds were

the distant lowing of a beast over by Clearhedge and the mutter of an uneasy bird in Furnace Wood.

She leaned over a gate beyond which the ground sloped steeply into the mist like the shelving shore of a sea. Old people said that the mist was the ghost of the sea, coming up at night to where it had always been in the days not very far back when the Tillingham Valley had formed part of a huge estuary. She stood and watched the white tide creep westward as far as Warf Wood, below Copstreet village on the hill. Here only a few centuries ago ships had been built, to glide proudly down the estuary with their pennoned masts and towering castles, anchoring off Rye in readiness for that age's enemy. She felt as if almost she could see their ghosts too, shadows sailing on the ghostly waterway.

The few lights that had shone on the ridge beyond it went out, but a glance over her shoulder told her that the black-out had been put up in the house. She need not go in yet. They did not want her—they were always perfectly happy in each other's company; and to-night she would rather not see them sitting together all unaware of the deception that lay at the roots of their happiness. Toby, she knew, had been looking forward all day to this evening hour which he would spend chatting and smoking with—she had almost said his son. It was difficult not to think of them as father and son, and for months at a time she had been able to do so, the facts of the situation seeming more dreamlike and unreal than its disguises.

Though they were different in so many ways, there was a curious kinship between them, the kinship of environment and upbringing and (her thoughts added reproachfully) the acceptance in their minds of the deeper kinship of blood. Bernard was not temperamentally like Toby—he was quicker, shallower, less idealistic and conscientious—but neither was he at all like Lawrie, as far as she could see. Nor had she discovered that he was like herself. It would seem as if the circumstances of his birth had given him a curious anonymity . . . he did not appear to have much character of his own, but to be rather a cheerful reflection of the people he was with. He was popular in the Army and had been popular at school, but he did not seem to have any close friends or deep enthusiasms.

His most obvious attachment was to the man he thought his father. He meant to be a farmer after the war, inheriting from his real father a love of the land that made him a very suitable com-

panion for his supposed one. As a small boy his play had been all farming, and Toby with his knowledge and experience had stood in the niche of a hero. Later on his school holidays had been spent in the farmyard, working with Toby in the fields, or going about with him to auctions and markets. Myra could see now that she herself was partly responsible for the closeness of their companionship. After all, she too loved Pyramus and took an interest and a share in its labours; but she had never associated herself with Bernard in this. Because of the shadow upon her love for him she had never been really happy in his company. She had been, she supposed, technically a good mother, given him every care; but she had never drawn him close to her in love and confidence as she had drawn Susie, and no doubt he himself must be aware that the son's did not equal the daughter's portion of her heart.

Things being so, she had only herself to blame for the situation which hurt her so deeply—and might one day hurt Toby infinitely more. Sometimes she tried to make herself think that the affection between those two, based as it was on common interests and personal liking, would stand up more easily to the truth than one less well founded—that she had indeed made any chance revelation more tolerable by letting things shape themselves as they had. But in her clearer thoughts—and they were mainly clear enough on this unhappy subject—she knew this would not do. Toby's love of Bernard had too much fatherly pride in it and their common interest in the farm and the land was too deeply coloured by thoughts of heirship and hopes of family succession to withstand a shock that would destroy both these foundations.

That was why the morning's episode still tormented her as she stood out there in the dusk. She could not make herself believe her own reassurances. Lawrie had not himself detected any likeness (how many people know what they actually look like?—if only that fool Sibylla . . . ). Even if he had, he would be as anxious to keep the whole thing quiet as she was; she would never see him again. Yet only six weeks ago, when she had been trying to reassure herself about his chances of meeting Bernard, telling herself that he would never come back to the place he had deserted, telling herself that even if he did he would never meet Bernard there, she had been wrong—all that she had said would not happen had happened. And now it seemed only natural that it should have happened—natural that

Lawrie should want to see his old home now that at last it was free of strangers, natural that Bernard should be home on leave. After all, he had had some leave due to him even without his illness. Perhaps in a few weeks' time she would be thinking it just as natural that Lawrie should have seen the resemblance pointed out to him by Sibylla, just as natural that an otherwise childless man should wish to establish or at least investigate this discovery of a son. . . .

She felt her throat thickening with the approach of tears, and in her heart was a sudden hot protest against the fate or providence that had ordered these things. Why should she still be suffering for something she had done more than twenty years ago, when she was a totally different person, it seemed, from what she now was? Standing there in the field above the valley she could hardly relate herself in any particular with the woman who once had stood in the next field and made the choice that had led to all the trouble. If she were to meet that woman now, she felt sure that she would dislike her. She saw the Myra of those days as a hard, selfish, silly creature, her will set on maintaining an independence which now meant less than dust. She saw her passionately loving a man whom it now seemed incredible that she could have tolerated. The difference between them was no mere difference of age, but of outlook, tastes and character. The years she had spent with Toby, her hard-working life at Pyramus, the birth of her children, had changed her utterly—there seemed almost a break of continuity . . . all except for the consequences of those acts which now might have been committed by another person.

There lay the continuity, of course—the continuity of cause and effect, seed-time and harvest. She had sowed wildly and ignorantly and now must reap a harvest of tares. O God, she thought, if only in those days I had known how to live! . . .

The words took her suddenly very far back, to the time when she had been sowing what she was reaping now, the self she had thought dead. She remembered how even in those far-off days she had been appalled by the mistakes she saw herself making, how suddenly she had cried out in her heart, I don't know how to live. She had seen herself blundering through all the big things of life—love and war and work and family ties—like a blind man lost in a wood. She had fallen and hurt herself, but until now she had hoped that she had hurt no one but herself. Now she saw that she had laid a snare for feet more sure than her own. . . . What could she do? How could

she save Toby and Bernard from this danger that threatened them from an enemy who was no one but herself who loved them both?

Looking up desperately at the stars, she seemed to get no answer from their remoteness. Looking round her at the fields, she saw nothing but the dark. From away towards the coast came a distant thump of guns . . . some venturing 'plane or E-boat. . . . Suddenly to her despair the thought of physical danger was welcome, and invasion almost became a hope. If the Germans landed at the Stussels or Camber Sands, Lawrie would go away and she would never see him again and he would never see Bernard. . . . But the next moment she despised herself for seeking a way out of her mistakes through those of other people. What was the war but an enlargement of herself in her self-seeking and vanity and ignorance? . . . She dropped her head upon the gate and the night wind passing over her might have been her own sigh. She saw the world reaping, like herself, a harvest that seemed to have been sown by a different hand, which yet itself and itself only had put into the ground. Her sorrow seemed now the sorrow of the world she lived in—a world that like herself did not know how to live.

#### IV

UNTIL the second week in August air-raids over Copstreet and the country round Pyramus had consisted mainly of the noting of "yellows," "reds" and "whites" in Civil Defence control rooms, varied every now and then by the sudden dropping of bombs by unheralded aircraft. There was, of course, the excitement of an occasional dog-fight, as the forces of bombers attacking the ports and coastal aerodromes were broken up and scattered about the sky. But so far very little had happened to disturb the ways of the farm or make Myra feel that Susie was in any special danger.

Then with the harvest came a change. It came on the very day they started to cut the Morgay field, which was the best field on the farm and nearly always the first to be cut, though Cryalls and the Scar were often sown before it. Myra, Connie and Susie, taking out to the men their "lunches" (as the nine-o'clock snack was called) of bread and onions and cold tea, suddenly became aware of a strange sound to which there was at first no sight attached—a sort of hollow

hum that seemed to echo round the fields like the noise of a bumble-bee imprisoned in a box. They had stood for a minute looking about them till they noticed that the men in the Morgay field were pointing to the sky. Then they looked up and saw what might have been a flock of wild swans changing waters; Myra had seen just such a flight in the depths of last winter's cold. Above it moved a still dimmer flock, and for a time the two arrowheads seemed to advance almost slowly across the empty sky. Then suddenly appeared a commotion among them, a breaking-up of the shape and order of their flight. The sky no longer hummed majestically but rattled and screamed. . . . Five tiny shapes had entered the great formation and dispersed it; five stones from David's sling had pierced the giant's forehead, breaking him up into his own dust. In almost an awestruck voice Myra heard one of the men say, "It's our boys."

After that the same thing happened every day and often several times a day. Formations of bombers flew in from the coast, on their way to Detling or Biggin Hill or some other inland aerodrome. Their advance was always majestic, their retreat always disorderly, and it was only in retreat that they were terrifying. For hunted bombers jettisoned their bombs and damaged bombers often flew for miles at hedgerow level before they crashed, or else came hurtling out of the sky in a stream of smoke and flame like Lucifer flung from heaven. The country round Pyramus became scarred with bomb-holes and burnt-out pyres. The more timid and more well-to-do of the inhabitants fled; the majority remained—to hunt for souvenirs and hope (sometimes not in vain) for some personal encounter with a German airman.

Life at the farm could no longer go on as usual, even in harvest time. Two of the men—Thorne and Brazier—were in the Home Guard with Toby. Most of every night saw them watching the fields for those air-borne troops whose threat was in the dusk of morning; most of every day saw their normal working powers slowed down by drowsiness and fatigue. It was lucky that the almost perfect weather of that summer allowed the harvest to drag over the weeks without fear of loss. The other two men—Strudgate and Barnes—were in the Auxiliary Fire Service, and Myra soon realized that much of her own warwork was to consist in finding them and despatching them to their action station every time there was an air-raid warning.

This sometimes happened seven or eight times a day. Pyramus

was too remote to rely on any siren, though on clear, still days four or five of them would moan over the fields from distant towns. Myra even learned to distinguish the deep roar of Marlingate's bull warning from the mosquito drone of Rye and the distant, ghostly wail of Rushmonden in the Kentish hills. She could not, however, depend on hearing even one of them, especially when she was in the house, and had to rely on the telephone, which announced "reds" from Copstreet firestation, sending her out to search the fields for her two firemen, who could never be found where they said they would be.

When she had them both wobble off on their bicycles with the same deliberation as they wobbled off home after the day's work, she would go back into the house, often just in time to receive "air-raid message, white." But as on one occasion the men had arrived in time to make up a crew which a few minutes later had extinguished a burning Spitfire and saved the pilot's life, she could not feel that her efforts were altogether so useless and ridiculous as they sometimes seemed.

Susie would often help her with her sharp ears, which could even sometimes hear the planes rising from their air-fields in France. She would come running in from the orchard or the yard—"Mummy, the humble-bumble's started" . . . and the departure of Strudgate and Barnes would be so expedited that sometimes the official warning did not come till they were half-way up the lane.

Myra did not allow her to go out to look for them, as the raid often materialized very quickly in a scatter of spent bullets or even a salvo from some diving plane. But the little girl seemed to rebuke her qualms with her total fearlessness, combined with a passionate and delighted interest. She would follow with avidity every sound of the battle her mother would not allow her to see. . . . "Mummy, that's cannon—not machine-gunning. The Germans have cannon, you know . . . he's climbing now . . . he's diving . . . that's a Spitfire after him—no, it's a Hurricane . . . they're turning round. . . . Mummy, Nurse Prosser's got a Spitfire and she rams the Dorniers and then she jumps into them and strangles the pilots . . . that's why they crash so often. But she always bales out first in a red, white and blue parachute. . . . Oh, Mummy, here's somebody hedgehopping—mayn't I go out and see?"

"No, you may not—and do, darling, keep away from the window."

"But I want to see . . ."

. . . A noise like an express train passing over the house, a gale that made the woods cry out, a rending of tree-tops and the freezing of Myra's blood.

But she would not do or say anything to violate the innocence of the child's courage. Toby still disliked the idea of sending her away, even though the Rector's two little girls, with whom she shared lessons, had been packed off to relations in Wales; and Myra would do nothing to persuade him. The danger, though probably greater than in other rural parts of England, was not confined to the south-east. Bombs were reported even from the bolt-holes of the West and Midlands, and when after some particularly noisy and shattering day she felt that she must appeal to Toby and ring up one of her sisters, her imagination—all that was left of her equipment as a novelist—would deter her with a picture of the only bomb in local history falling on Chessington Vicarage or Cumberbatch Hall the day after Susie had arrived there.

After all, it was not as if the child was frightened. But she would most certainly be so if she was sent away from them all—her father, her mother, Connie, the animals, the farm-men and the farm-men's children with whom she played in glamorous substitute for those of her own class. Away from them she would fathom depths of fear that no plunging bomber could reach, but in her own little world of things and people she seemed to find reassurances which enabled her to face the racket of that larger world which had gone mad around her.

As the days passed, Myra became even more convinced of the fatuity of thinking that a child is more easily frightened than a grown-up person—or frightened, rather, of the same things that frighten a grown-up person. Indeed, after a time she found herself learning courage and confidence from Susie, learning not to waste her tears on what might never happen and to draw a queer, half-humorous stimulation from what she did. Like most of her neighbours, she kept a bag ready packed for flight in any sudden emergency, but actually her fear of invasion decreased in proportion to the growing fury of the battle overhead.

So many times she had seen the giant stride across the sky—Goliath, Orion, Polyphemus, Blunderbore—advancing in thunderous rhythm, threatening the earth below. So many times she had seen the boy David spring to meet him, piercing his mighty armour, so that

he staggered, wheeled and fell, dissolved, and was hurled in fragments over the horizon. Every assault of the giant ended in an act of faith in the invincible boy David.

After a while the battle became a sort of clock. Events in the house and on the farm were regulated by the raids, which came very reliably at almost regular intervals, determined, no doubt, in part by the orderliness of the German mind, but mainly by the aspects of the sun. Mealtimes of both men and animals must be altered to suit the new time-table. Myra must be free to leave the kitchen or the chicken-run to answer the telephone and summon Barnes and Strudgate; they in their turn must be free to leave at once. Toby must have both an earlier supper and an earlier bed-time, and breakfast must be waiting for him when he came home in the dew. For the same reason, Thorne and Brazier must be allowed an hour or two's sleep on their return, and she and Connie must do the early milking—an inversion of custom much wider than their own in a district where hitherto the milkers had always been men. Connie's milking involved a different time for Susie's dressing, and altogether the day was being pushed into a new shape, which had the unexpected result of making it seem much longer. Actually it was not so, for though it began earlier it also finished earlier, everyone seeking an early bed-time. What made it seem long was that very crowdedness which is supposed to make time pass quickly; each day was a crowd of events in which the separate items were embedded in strain, because of the clock of national emergency which measured its routine with almost regular interruptions.

In consequence days became a week, a week stretched into a month and the past immediately before the battle became infinitely remote. Myra scarcely remembered the day that once had been so black. The episode of Sibylla's mistake which might have ruined her was now closed and irrelevant. Lawrie himself must by this time be far away—back in Northumberland with his wife. He had made no attempt to see her again; he, no more than she, wished the past to be revived. Her fears had been all in vain.

This was how she thought of the affair when she thought of it at all. It was therefore a double shock to see one afternoon his very self walking up the drive towards the farmhouse—a shock to see him

and a shock to realize that only a fortnight had passed since she had seen him last.

She was in the kitchen, making a meat pie—her efforts were concentrated now on dishes which when once made could be served at any moment and warmed up indefinitely. Her first impulse was to tell Connie to say she was not at home, but she realized at once that this would be only to postpone or even increase the difficulties of the situation. She had better see Lawrie and find out perhaps that it was only a friendly call. Bernard had gone back to his regiment some ages ago—or was it last Thursday?—and Toby was out; so she had a clear field in which to face her alarms.

She told Connie to show him into the sitting-room and ran quickly upstairs to make the woman he should see today less shockingly unlike the woman he had loved more than twenty years ago. It was not so much vanity as pride that made her try to restore to her cheeks and lips the ghost of their old colouring. She did not want him to think that twenty-two years of happy marriage and hard work had aged her as much as she knew they had. Looking in the glass, she wondered if she had ever been pretty. Probably not, with that wide mouth and indefinite nose, but attractive in an uncommon, elphin way that now was lost in spreading lines. Her hair was still soft and abundant, but quite grey. She combed the short curls into a frame for her tinted, powdered face, and felt more equal to meeting the man she had not seen, (except for one ill-favoured moment) since the days when he thought her lovely.

As he rose to greet her she noticed (as she had not had time or wits to do before) how comparatively little he had changed, in spite of all he had been through. There was grey on his temples and his cheeks were lined; his shoulders stooped a little . . . but she wished, things being as they were, that he had changed more. It was queer that ill-health and shattered nerves should not have such an ageing effect as hard work and family cares. Perhaps the fundamental difference between man and woman had something to do with it. . . . He looked several years younger than she did now.

“Well, Myra . . .” He took her hand and kept it. “Are you surprised to see me?”

“I am a little. I thought you had left Bewbush—I thought you were staying only a few days.”

"Was that why you didn't telephone?" He had drawn her down beside him on the sofa before she was able to take her hand away.

"I—I hadn't any time. I've been so busy . . ."

He smiled; and suddenly they were back again in the blue and golden light of Trearnion, smiling at each other on the shore—just before they quarreled.

"My dear, I never expected you to telephone."

She felt angry with him for having reopened their relationship on lines so like its first creation. She felt that after all these years he should have approached her almost as a stranger. She should in fact have been Mrs. Street instead of My Dear. . . . After all, he did not know of the link that still existed between them—or did he?

She felt the blood leave her heart and fought for casualness.

"Are you staying much longer?"

"No—not much longer; only a little."

"This isn't a very pleasant neighbourhood to be staying in just now—I mean, for anybody who's been shell-shocked it must be rather an ordeal."

"Oh, my shell-shock never took that form," he said lightly. "I shan't start screaming and rolling on the ground directly the siren goes. My chief symptom was a bitter disgust for everything I used once to love and believe in." Her heart was still cold, but she felt the colour rushing to her face. "That's why I've never been here till now. I couldn't bear the sight of Bewbush—and Pyramus . . . let me congratulate you, by the way, on making it so lovely."

"It's just as it always was. We've scarcely altered it at all."

"Whereas I wanted to do a lot—to paint the lily. I see that now. You were right—are right. I'm glad you're living here."

She did not know what to say, and yet she was anxious to say something for fear of what he might say if she did not.

"Are—are you quite all right again?"

"I've a gammy leg and a bomb splinter at the bottom of my spine; but I can get about now—I can walk two or three miles and I'm not afraid to go out by myself; and I can bear to stay at Bewbush and even to sit talking to you here at Pyramus. So it's for you to assess the exact degree of my recovery."

She was not used to this perverse unsubstantial talk. For years now speech had been like bread—plain and simple and sometimes, no doubt, stodgy. She asked:

"What sort of place have you in Northumberland? Is it a farm?"

"Oh no. I haven't touched farming since the last war. But I've got a nice garden—roses, rhododendrons, herbaceous borders, a yew alley with some amusing topiary work, a collection of flowering Himalayan trees and an alpine garden which is quite a show piece."

As he enumerated these features Myra was conscious of a growing resentment at the bitterness in his voice. She felt intuitively that he was trying to blame *her* for his lost ambitions and conventional substitutes—as if they were not all due to his injuries in the last war, injuries which must have changed both him and his circumstances independently of anything she had done. No doubt his broken mind had fermented a grudge against her, which might have been inflamed by his return to the place that he had lost. But she would not accept the idea that it was because of her that he had lost it—she would not let herself be made the villain of his play. She pretended to envy him.

"You're wise," she said. "You always liked things nice and it's impossible to have that if you're farming. A farm's a sort of pit that swallows up everything. I've often wanted to do something about the garden here, but I've never had the time, let alone the money."

"Are you happy, Myra?"

"Yes," she said angrily, "I am."

"I congratulate you. I wish I was, and it's nobody's fault that I am not. I have enough money for the sort of dead-and-alive existence I lead, and my wife has stuck to me under conditions that would have driven away most women."

"Is she coming to Bewbush?"

"Not this summer. She's too busy with her war-work—her Red Cross and her A.R.P. and her Savings Group and her Women's Institute—all those manifold excellent activities that are going to drive the Germans back across the Rhine."

"We're involved in all that here, of course." She plunged for safety into the nearest rut. "Toby and two of the men are in the Home Guard, and two others are in the A.F.S., while I'm a sort of deputy farm-worker for everything except ploughing and farriery, and my little girl acts as unofficial air-raid warning."

He waited a moment before he said:

"And your son is in the Army. Or don't you take the Army seriously as 'war-work'?"

Myra coloured. It seemed odd now that she had left out Bernard.

"I was thinking only of Civil Defence," she said feebly.

"Well, the Army probably counts for less in this war than it has in any other. I wonder your boy didn't want to join the Air Force."

"He's never been in the least interested in flying and he's no good at mechanics—can't even do much with a car."

She found herself unwillingly being made to talk about Bernard.

"How old is he now?"

"About twenty-two."

"Is that a recent photograph?"

He was looking at the chimney-piece where Bernard's photograph stood with Toby's and Susie's and one or two others. It was not a very recent one and Myra had forgotten all about it till then. Now she wished that she could have hidden it away.

"It was taken just before the war. I've only snapshots of him in uniform."

"What do you think of this?"

He took a folding case out of his pocket and opened it. Inside was what might have been a photograph of Bernard.

"It was taken just before the last war. I must have been just his age—twenty-two."

Myra stared, but her eyes were full of darkness. She could not speak. She sat in a sort of stupid silence as he stood up and limped across to the chimney-piece.

"Yes, it's very like." He picked up the photograph and sat down again with the two on his lap. "Yes, it's very like," he said a second time—he did not say like whom. Then he pushed both the photographs into her hands, which took hold of them mechanically.

"After I'd met your boy I wrote to my wife and asked her to send me this. I waited till she had sent it before I came to see you."

Myra had recovered her sight—indeed the two pictures seemed to have mysteriously printed themselves upon her eyelids, so that she saw them even when she shut her eyes. One was a profile, the other three-quarter face, but they might both have been of the same man. They were more like than the originals. In a queer, detached way she thought that had they been photographs of women, the likeness would have been partly covered by differences in clothes and hairdressing; but Bernard and Lawrie both wore their hair smoothly brushed back, both wore dark suits with soft collars and ties that seemed to have diverged very little in the course of twenty-odd years. Bernard looked,

perhaps, the more wide-eyed of the two, but it might have been a difference due to the camera. She heard herself saying:

“What do you mean to do about it?”

He answered quickly:

“Nothing.”

Her eyes met his in almost incredulous relief.

“If I’d meant to do anything about it,” he continued, “I shouldn’t have waited to come here till I knew he’d gone away. I might have done something if I’d known earlier. . . . My dear, why didn’t I know earlier?”

Her throat was so dry that she could hardly speak, and she had to swallow repeatedly while she said:

“I couldn’t . . . I couldn’t face you with that after what you’d said about marrying . . . so . . . so . . .”

“You married Toby Street.”

“It seemed the only thing I could do.”

“Though you didn’t love him.”

“Not then—I do now.”

“And has he ever had the faintest suspicion?”

“Not the faintest.”

He was silent for quite a while, staring at the two photographs, which he had taken back into his hands.

“Well,” he said at last, “I’m glad. It’s explained something that I couldn’t understand. . . . I could never imagine what had made you let me down like that. Now it’s explained and I feel better.”

“You never . . . it didn’t occur to you? . . . you never guessed?

.”

“No; how could I? I mean, I’d taken it for granted that if anything like that had happened you’d have told me. By the way, I suppose it didn’t strike you that I might want a son.”

“No, it didn’t—not after what you’d said about marriage.”

He looked angry for a moment, then he said:

“You’re right. I didn’t want a son, and I don’t now. But I’m interested.”

He stared hard at the two photographs.

“Is he like me—in character, I mean?”

“No. Oddly enough, he’s more like Toby.”

“Is Toby fond of him?”

“Very fond.”

"Everything's all right then."

She said half angrily:

"I don't know about that."

All that she had suffered from him in the past, in the last few days, and in the last few moments rose suddenly against him.

"I mean that everything's as right as it can be in the rather deplorable circumstances. After all, things might have been much worse. Toby mightn't have liked the boy or I might have liked him."

"Toby's liking him is no help at all. Sometimes I can't bear to see them together, knowing the truth."

"You shouldn't be so squeamish, Myra. The truth can't matter to either of them as long as they don't know it. When next you see them together, think how lucky they both are not to know it—and how lucky you are that they don't. You may even add how lucky we all are that I don't mind that they don't. So you see that, after all, the picture is quite a happy one."

She said: "I don't understand you."

"What don't you understand?"

"Why, if you don't really want to see any more of Bernard, you took so much trouble to find out the truth."

"Call it curiosity, if you like—or perhaps a natural interest. Besides, I'm glad, as I've told you, to have your conduct explained. There's another thing, too, which you certainly may not understand. Though I'd much rather that Toby went on being his father, I like to think that long ago in another world I begot him."

She could not resist saying:

"You wouldn't have liked it if I'd told you at the time."

"No, my dear, of course I shouldn't. Apart from the immediate problem I didn't need that sort of reassurance then. I think you did quite right not to tell me. Though you made me suffer horribly, I think you did the thing that has turned out best for us all. I should have made a poor father and a sorry husband. I'm thankful, Myra, that you haven't had to bear with me all these years. You would have found me much more of a burden than even poor Nancy has done. After all, she's been a nurse and is used to the sort of mess I am, and—which is also important—she's never known me any different. Yes—though I'd never have believed it possible twenty years ago that I could ever forgive you—I say now quite frankly that I think you did the right thing."

She was so deeply engrossed in him and what he was saying that she had not noticed the shadow that crossed the french window behind them. Before she was aware of Toby's presence he had actually come into the room.

"What—Bernard? My boy . . . I beg your pardon."

She had sprung to her feet and saw his baffled gaze fall on Lawrie, who on account of his damaged leg was unable to rise so quickly.

"Don't get up," said Toby in a changed voice. "How are you, Buckrose? It must be twenty years since I've seen you, and for a moment I took you for my son."

"Well, we're told that all cats in the dark are grey and no doubt all red-headed men look very much alike when seen from behind."

"I couldn't see more than the crown of your head and over the top of the sofa."

He might have said, Your hair grows just like my son's, as well as being the same color. But he did not, and to Myra there was something sinister in the omission. In a sort of daze she saw the two photographs still lying on Lawrie's lap.

"Now you're sitting opposite me," he said, "you see how little you flattered your young man by the mistake."

He might have added that the mistake had been made before by the young man's aunt, but here again was an obvious remark left out. She felt like a critic watching a play, noticing how the dialogue was being built up round the situation, feeling that it could be improved and wondering how the author would ultimately acquit himself.

"Oh, we none of us get any younger," said Toby in a flat voice which showed that he was thinking deeply.

"Especially in war-time, and it seems to be always war-time now. Personally I object to having a new war started before I've got rid of my hangover from the last one."

There was a terrible pause. The actors had dried up; and Myra, instead of being the critic, became the prompter and said encouragingly:

"Are you paying a long visit to your sister, Mr. Buckrose?"

"Not very long. I'm going back to Northumberland to-morrow. I'm sorry I couldn't get over to see you before, but I'm lucky to have found you both at home." Then he suddenly seemed to become aware

of the photographs he was holding. "Mrs. Street has been showing me some photographs of your son. I hear he's joining an O.C.T.U."

"Yes; he ought to get his commission before long. You met him, didn't you, when he was home on leave?"

"I caught just a glimpse of him when Mrs. Street very kindly drove me home from the 'bus stop."

Myra could hardly sit still. She realized that Lawrie was doing his best to save the situation, but she also knew that Toby was still thinking. He had not dismissed the subject as Lawrie had meant him to do, and he was turning over in his mind everything that the other man was saying. She wished Lawrie would go, yet she saw that it would not do for him to make too hasty a departure.

Then suddenly Toby leaned forward and took the photographs into his own hands. She could not watch him any more, but sprang up with an idiotic laugh.

"I'll go and get tea."

"Please don't on my account," said Lawrie. "I must be pushing off. My sister's expecting me."

She saw that she was acting foolishly, but had to go on playing her part.

"Oh, don't go. It won't take me a minute to get tea."

But to her relief he struggled to his feet.

"I really must. My niece, who's in the Waafs, is arriving this afternoon, and I promised my sister I'd be back. I'm sorry to have paid you such a short visit as well as such a belated one, but I don't get about very easily; so I hope you'll forgive me."

"Are you walking home?"

"Yes; it's good for me to walk when my leg isn't actually playing me up."

All this time Toby did not say a word; he was still looking at the photographs. She told herself that it might be diffidence which prevented him talking normally to Lawrie, questioning him about Bewbush and about his home in the North. But she could not make herself really believe that there was anything natural in this profound abstraction. Even when he put aside the photographs and shook hands with the departing visitor she could see, with the eye of over twenty years' experience, that his mind was busy with problems deeper than any of tact. She noticed, too, that he did not walk with Lawrie any farther than the garden gate. Usually he would see a visitor out of

the yard or even down the drive; but on this occasion he was out of the room no longer than it took her to restore Bernard's photograph to the chimney-piece and slip Lawrie's into her writing-table drawer.

Toby's eyes had a puzzled, questioning look as he came in from the garden, and she knew that he was waiting for her to speak. She said nervously:

"I was surprised to see Lawrie Buckrose this afternoon. I thought he had gone home some time ago."

But Toby was still waiting. After a pause he said:

"Funny his being so like Bernard."

Myra said with a dry throat:

"It's only a superficial likeness. Sibylla's half blind and you were coming indoors out of strong sunshine." Then with a desperate attempt at jauntiness: "Bernard wouldn't be at all pleased if he knew you'd made the same mistake as Auntie."

"The tops of their heads are exactly alike. I don't mean only the colour of the hair but the way it grows in a double crown. You know how Bernard's always complaining."

"Possibly all red hair grows in that way."

Then she thought, I mustn't deny the likeness too emphatically or he'll grow suspicious. He isn't suspicious now—only puzzled; but he'd be suspicious if it was anyone else. It's only because he trusts me so absolutely, because I'm so perfect in his eyes. . . .

She felt a sob in her throat. This would never do. Swallowing hard, she said:

"I'll pull his leg when I write next. I'll tell him everyone agrees that he and Lawrie might be brothers." She dared not say "father and son."

Toby walked over to the mantelpiece and stared hard at Bernard's photograph.

"May I have another look at the other one? Where is it?"

"I—I put it away in my drawer. It's not a very nice one."

As she took it out she was searching desperately for some excuse not to give it to him, but of course she could not find one.

"I've never seen this one before. When was it taken?"

He stared at the photograph, wrinkling his forehead.

"It was taken at the same time as the other. But I didn't like the proof, so I had only a single print made."

Her first feeling was one of relief at her own improvisation, fol-

lowed immediately by horror at the thought that she was lying to Toby.

"Why have even a single print made if you didn't like it?"

He looked at her gravely, and she realized that her improvisation had not been so good as she thought—it had given him his first suspicion that she was lying. She felt sick as she silently watched him studying the two photographs which he held, one in each hand.

"It certainly isn't a very good likeness. It gives him too heavy a jaw . . ." He gazed intently and she had a sudden feeling, an intuition, of disaster. Yielding to the impulse, she moved forward as if to take the photograph out of his hand. At that moment he said:

"But this is quite a different style of photograph, and it was taken by a different photographer."

Myra was dumb.

"Look—"

He held out the two towards her. Bernard's bore the name of a Marlingate photographer, the other was stamped "Howard Studios, Angmering."

"But how can—"

She broke off. It seemed useless to speak, for there was nothing that she could say to explain a contingency she could have foreseen, though not, even if she had foreseen it, provided for. Then in a silly voice unlike her own she heard herself say:

"Oh, I must have made a mistake—he must have had it taken some other time."

"But when has he ever been in Angmering? Angmering was where—"

Again he stopped and thought, while all the time she racked her head for some explanation. She still had not found one when he said:

"That's an old photo of Buckrose."

He knew that she was lying now, though possibly even now he did not fully imagine anything worse. Yet why should she lie to him about an old photograph of Lawrie Buckrose after more than twenty years of truthfulness and straight dealing? She saw the lines of his face grow stern and the situation froze into a sort of evil dream. His voice sounded very far off as he asked:

"Why did you tell me it was Bernard?"

"I didn't tell you." She stopped—this was a mere quibble. "I

mean—" As she met his eyes she seemed to read the sum of her lies' futility. "I mean—oh, Toby . . . it all happened so very long ago."

She felt very ill and sat down.

"So this was why he came."

His voice still seemed to reach her from a great way off and after an infinite lapse of time. For a moment she wondered if she had fainted, but realized that she was sitting upright, though there seemed to have been some sort of black-out.

"Toby . . ."

She looked up at him and saw the pallor that had crept over his sunburned skin. He was deeply tanned and yet his face looked haggard and pale—as he might have looked if he were dead.

"Toby . . ."

"Well?"

"It all . . . Oh, Toby, don't look at me like that. It all happened so very long ago—more than twenty years."

His drawn, grey face no longer made her think of death, because the dead do not suffer any more.

"You—you've been lying to me—"

"No, Toby—no—not lying. I only didn't speak—I couldn't tell you. Oh, please try to understand."

He took no notice of her—in fact, he did not seem to hear her as he finished his sentence.

"—for more than twenty years."

"That's it," she said idiotically; "it was so very long ago."

"But why"—he looked at her sharply and there was in his voice an unfamiliar quickness of anger—"why didn't you tell me? I mean—it was before we married . . ."

"Yes, of course it was. That was why I didn't tell you—I didn't really know you then."

"So you married me to give your child a name."

"I tell you I—I didn't know you then. I didn't love you—as I do now. Oh, Toby, please try to understand. I know I treated you badly, but I was at my wits' end. I was terrified of my family finding out. Mother was alive then . . . so I did what seemed to me the only thing to do. I knew that you loved me and that I could love you—I felt that I could make you happy, so I didn't think it so very wrong to take what you offered."

He had listened to her patiently, but his voice was still angry and unconvinced as he exclaimed:

"Why the hell didn't you marry Buckrose?"

"Because I didn't love him any more, and I knew he didn't love me."

"Didn't he know the child was coming?"

"No. He knew nothing—absolutely nothing—till a week or two ago, when he met Bernard for the first time."

"O God! . . ."

She saw him overwhelmed by an aspect of the tragedy which till then he had not fully realized. He had been so stunned by her falsehood, by the lie that she had been living for the whole of their married life, that he had not grasped all its implications. But now he was waking to a new disaster—he no longer had a son.

"My boy," he cried brokenly, and sank down on a chair, hiding his face in his hands. "My boy . . . no, no, he isn't mine. He's not mine at all—not my son—oh, Bernard . . . O my God! . . ."

He was sobbing. She saw his shoulders heave and his grey head shake in the grip of his hands. At that moment she would gladly have died if her death could have undone what she had done.

She dared not speak to him or offer any comfort, for it was she who loved him who had struck him down and any tenderness from her would be only another blow. She felt her own tears coming and for some moments they both sat choking in separate grief, without any comfort from each other. Then he recovered himself and asked her in a strange, cold voice that she had never heard him use to anyone:

"Is Buckrose going to do anything about this?"

"No. He said plainly that he didn't want to see Bernard again."

"Then why did he come over this afternoon with that photograph?"

"Out of interest—curiosity. . . . He wanted to make sure . . . and I think he wanted some things explained—my marriage . . ."

"Had you left him before you became engaged to me?"

He was questioning her like a judge.

"Not definitely. I hadn't seen him for two months—he was in France—but we still corresponded."

"Did you still care for him? You told me that you'd stopped caring for him."

"Yes, I had—in the way I used to. Directly I became engaged to you I wrote and told him it was all over."

"Why didn't he marry you in the first place?"

"He said he must marry someone with money, for the sake of Bewbush and the estate. Now I see it was because he never really cared for me enough."

"And how long did you live with him?—during the whole of the last war?"

"No—only a year from the summer of nineteen-sixteen."

He said no more for a while, and they faced each other in silence. Then suddenly he shook himself and cried:

"My God! This is like meeting a stranger."

She could have said the same. It was difficult to recognize the loving, understanding husband of more than twenty years in this cold judge. A sudden resentment seized her—he might have been more forgiving . . . but the next moment, as she remembered all that she had done to him, she reproved herself for the thought.

"Toby," she said in a small voice, "I want to make one thing clear. Ever since we've been married, I've been absolutely true to you, in thought as well as in act—I swear I have. I've loved nobody but you—I've thought of nobody but you—I couldn't have loved you more if I'd never met Lawrie Buckrose. And I haven't lied to you, except by silence. It's only that I let things drift, and sometimes—this is really true—there were moments when I almost forgot that Bernard wasn't your son."

His mouth stretched into a smile that was as unlike him as his anger.

"I don't think I shall find that quite so easy."

She said nothing. It is always unwise to say too much to strangers. . . . Then suddenly she realized that he was no stranger. She had met him years ago—in a field near Dew Farm above the Tillingham Marshes. She could see the soft, grey evening sky sinking over the woods, smothering the pale streak of Watt's Palace . . . of the farm she had told him was Watt's Palace, though she did not really know the name. She had said that a little girl called Ivy Betersden lived there, and he had believed her until she had let her imagination run away with her and told him some preposterous tales. Then she had seen doubt creep into his eyes and he had wrinkled his forehead in perplexity—just as when he was examining Lawrie's photo. . . . Then

doubt had hardened into unbelief and frozen into condemnation. Then, as now, he had been her judge.

The effect of this memory was to plunge her into a deep, overwhelming tenderness. The tears rushed back into her eyes as, suddenly understanding him, she forgave him his unforgiveness.

“Toby . . . Oh, my dear . . .”

“Well?”

He would not forgive her so easily.

“How can I make you understand that I was a different person then?”

He shook his head, and she realized that she was expecting too much. She went on, perhaps unwisely:

“Those were terrible times, and lots of us went mad. When the men went out to the Front, thinking they might never see us again . . . well, it was difficult to remember all the rules one had been taught.”

“‘Rules’—so to you it was only ‘rules.’ . . . I can’t understand . . . but that doesn’t matter. Whatever you say you can’t make out that the whole thing’s over and done with. If it was . . . but it isn’t. There’s Bernard—”

The look of death came back into his eyes, and her new tenderness sank into despair. It seemed to her now that she had no right to expect forgiveness. One may expect forgiveness for a past act, but this act was not past. It was repeating itself, recurring like a recurring decimal, going on and on, adding up the last war with the present one, and still going on and on.

“Then I won’t ask you to forgive me,” she said in a voice made proud by sorrow. “Forget that I ever did. If you like I’ll leave this house and never see you again.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. Do you want everyone to know?”

“No. But how are we to go on?”

“We shall *have* to go on.”

“We can’t—not as we are—not as enemies.”

She saw his face change and a look almost of fear come into it. “Don’t, Myra—don’t. . . . You must give me time. . . . It’s only that I’m not myself. . . . It’s been such a shock—such a blow . . .”

He broke off, and they both looked nervously towards the door as it opened.

“Mummy, the humble-bumble’s started.”

Susie came into the room, then sensing the atmosphere of strain, stopped and gazed anxiously from one to the other with her robin's eyes—uniting them in a determination that she should not see anything amiss.

"Thank you, pet," said Toby. "I'll go and tell the men."

"I'll go," said Myra, rising automatically.

"No; I've got to go down to the Scar field anyhow, and I know where they're working—I shall pass them on the way. You stay here with Susie."

The two strangers had become two parents, hiding their strangeness and their enmity from the little girl who was now their only child.

It was one of the unforeseen chances of war that at that moment her private life should seem to stop and her thoughts to be swept out of their own wretchedness into wider channels of fear and action. For the rest of the day she had scarcely a moment's leisure to think of herself. The raid developed into one of the worst that the district had known, and soon the sky was screaming with angry planes. The battle seemed more westward than its predecessors—David and Goliath were fighting right over the fields of Pyramus.

By the time a bomber had crashed into Warf Wood and Toby, Brazier and Thorne been called out with the rest of the Home Guard to mop up the crew who had been seen baling out over the Tillingham Valley—by the time she had had one of them sitting for an hour in her kitchen and had listened to his guttural assurances that the war would be over and he himself enjoying life in a German-occupied London by the middle of September—by the time she had shaken Connie out of the fit of hysterics which she alone thought suitable to the occasion, and driven Susie (whose excitement had made her really naughty) at least a dozen times from the yard back into the house—by the time she had provided drinks and meals for a number of stray people as well as her own family, the afternoon's tragedy seemed as remote as the twenty-year-old tragedy from which it had sprung.

Only at intervals did it intrude on the present: once when unexpectedly running into Toby in the kitchen passage she missed the smile, the passing touch, the loving enquiry—"how are you getting on?"—which would normally have accompanied such a meeting; another time when, finding herself for once alone, she had fetched

Lawrie's photograph out of the sitting-room, where for two hours it had lain forgotten, and burned it in the kitchen fire. Apart from such occasions her mind was too full and her body too tired to be able to think of anything but sleep.

It seemed lucky now that Toby's nights with the Home Guard had brought a change into their sleeping arrangements. So as not to disturb her by his small-hour risings he had moved into the room where Susie used to sleep, and she had taken the little girl into her own. Here was another instance of the strategy of war acting for the relief of private lives. She could not have borne to lie down beside a stranger, neither could she have borne to see him do it. But for them to have suddenly decided to sleep apart would have been both a public proclamation of their estrangement and its final seal. She was glad to be able to follow her normal night's routine, treading softly about the room where Susie already lay sleep beside a huge and hideous pin-cushion shaped like a carrot which had for some reason captured her deepest affections when Sibylla bought it for her at a Marlingate sale of work. She was so tired that Toby's omission to kiss her good-night before going into his own room had only a mental recording, without emotional effect.

Directly she lay down she fell asleep and slept heavily and dreamlessly for five hours. Then, her body rested, her mind could no longer escape its doom. Towards three o'clock she suddenly found herself broad awake, with a sense of nightmare behind her—a nightmare that terribly resolved itself into reality. Immediately the afternoon was before her mind in all the clarity of a lit stage. The drawing-room was the scene; Toby, Lawrie and herself were the actors. The raid, the battle in the skies, the bomber smoking in the woods, the enemy in her kitchen, were all so much dramatic lumber, stacked aside in the wings. She could hear Lawrie's voice—Toby's voice—her own voice—with a clearness due to the heightened sensibility of a mind refreshed by sleep. It was the first time she had really looked back, but at no earlier moment, with all the turmoil of the day about her, could she have seen the episode with such dreadful lucidity. Impossible to dismiss it and go to sleep again—she must let it repeat itself in her thoughts till it had worked itself out of them and she could cover it up with others, though only maybe with others derived from it. For the moment she must just lie and watch it, listen to it, happening all over again.

After a time she began to wonder at what stage Toby had begun to suspect her. He had certainly been mystified and anxious from the very start; but up to a point she felt that he would have been willing to accept any explanation she could have offered, even if not a very good one. Nothing would have seemed more incredible than what had actually happened. If only she had thought of something, however flimsy, Lawrie would almost certainly have backed her up. She might have said he had come over to announce a connection between the two families . . . her mind, still near enough to sleep to be without the brake of reason, rushed wildly down an explanation in which Lawrie, having noticed the startling resemblance between himself and Bernard, had investigated the records of Bewbush Manor and found an alliance between a Buckrose and a Street not so very long ago. Even though the Streets had only recently come into the district, Toby might have been willing to accept such a statement, especially as she did not think there were any family records of his own to upset it. Oh, why had the idea not come to her then, instead of now, twelve hours too late? She rolled her hot face in her pillow, the pain of memory exacerbated by the itchings of regret.

She went back further still, in the conviction that if she had acted differently at an earlier point she could have settled the affair even better. After all, the solution she had just thought of would only have involved her in another set of lies and pretences. But if she had never started the slide . . . perhaps if she had driven Lawrie no farther than Duckreed Corner, where after all he had asked to be put down . . . Exactly when had he noticed his own likeness to Bernard? Suppose that it had not occurred to him till just as they were arriving at Bewbush . . . Of course Sibylla, the old fool, had given the whole thing away at the very start. . . . Oh, why had she asked Sibylla out to Pyramus that day?—any other day in the following week would have done and probably on none of them would Lawrie have been waiting at the 'bus stop. . . . Why had she asked Sibylla out at all? She hadn't really wanted to come—she was far too much afraid of being caught by an air-raid away from home. It would have been better if Bernard had gone in to Marlingate to see her, though the silly old girl always talked as if the place was a raging inferno and not safe for anyone to enter except herself. . . .

Myra's regrets were becoming more futile as they receded to circumstances beyond her control. Sibylla was now the author of her

tragedy; Sibylla, monumental in old-fashioned suit and towering hat, had become Mephistopheles. . . . But for Sibylla she would still be a happy woman. . . . She tossed about the bed in helpless rage against Sibylla, a rage which was only fed by her awareness of its injustice.

Unable to lie in bed any longer, she slipped out and crossed over to the window. The black-out had been taken down to let in more air, and she was able to sit on the window-seat and drink in the refreshment of the night. There was no wind, and the dark bunches of the trees were as motionless as the blocks and roundels of the farm buildings. High up on the zenith a 'plane was droning and fingers of searchlight groped among the stars. Hitherto there had been very little air activity at night; indeed a rumour went about that night-bombing was an old-fashioned British idea and the more enlightened Hun would attack only when his target was in full view by day. But now the air was throbbing with a faint, syncopated hum, and then far off she heard a rumble of gunfire . . . new tactics were being tried. But she could no longer lose herself in larger matters. She was all swollen now—had become monstrous—had filled everything with herself. . . . O God, help me! . . . She bowed her head into her hands and prayed all wildly and uncertainly, scarcely knowing how to pray. God help me—I can't live on like this. Oh, make Toby forgive me—let us be to each other what we used to be before—or let me die. The world is full of death—it would be easy enough to kill me, and Susie would be all right with Toby; he'd always be good to *her*.....

Sobs were beginning to choke her, and suddenly she heard the child move in her bed as if she were waking. She must not be woken up to such a scene; she must not, at all costs, see her mother in such grief. Her sensitive, loving little heart might never get over the shock of it. No, whatever happened, Susie must remain in her happy, homely world of Father and Mother and the farm and Nurse Prosser—she must never be driven out of it to take refuge in palaces with Ivy Betherdens . . .

Her thoughts rushed back over forty years into the field below Dew Farm, and once more she was gazing into Toby's boyish, disapproving face. What a fool she had been to have forgotten that face for so long! It was the face that he turned on her now instead of the lined, sunburnt face of his middle-age. She should have remembered it twenty-three years ago. Toby was a man whose integrity and moral fastidiousness might never recover from her rough and careless treat-

ment of them. As a boy he had been righteous—as a young man he had been idealistic. In the man he was now both these qualities had been mellowed by tenderness and warmth of feeling, but a tenderness and a warmth which had only made him in other respects more vulnerable. He would never, never be able to understand the selfish opportunism that had urged her to make a convenience of his life-long love for her. Her behaviour was something outside his experience and imagination; and if she blamed him for having failed to understand her after all these years, let her remember that up to this latest moment she also had failed either to understand or to imagine him.

Now in the light of that far-off, childish episode she seemed to know him for the first time, to know him and to lose him. She had destroyed her own image in his heart just as surely as she had destroyed the image of his son. He had nothing left now but what she had left—little Susie, unconscious and unaware of it all. In her alone a dead husband and wife lived on as father and mother.

The fingers of light were fading as the morning paled. The 'plane had droned away into another sky and a great silence hung over the fields. Myra turned back towards her bed, suddenly quietened. Her struggle among the lost ways of the past had ceased; her mind had recovered from its engorgement and felt as empty as the sky. She was able to lie down again, though she did not expect to sleep. She had no further need of sleep, for she had become an empty shell. She lay quiet and empty, without pain or sleep, waiting for the tide of a new day to wash over her and fill the empty space where a living creature once had been.

## V

AFTER that the planes came by night as well as by day. They did not do so in any force, but the battle no longer died down with the sun. The big formations still came over in daylight, making the skies roar like a smithy; at night came the dragging, broken sound of single bombers following one another across the empty battle-air. Their progress gave a curious impression of labour. . . . "Every night," said old Thorne, the stockman's father, "we hears 'un toiling over Haneholt's Wood." Every night some toiler would release his load apparently at random. High explosive dropped in a field at the back of Maidenbower, stripping every tile off roof and walls, leaving

only the old timber frame standing like a skeleton. More terribly a land mine sank on its slow wing into some trees by Haneholt's Farm, hanging its threat among the branches for several minutes and then suddenly flinging trees and farm together into the sky. An oil bomb made a brief mock-day of the Tillingham Marshes, and almost every night from her window at Pyramus Myra could see the queer green landscape of the incendiary bombs, which lit up the fields in much the same ghostly way as the stage used to be lit for the entrance of the Demon King in the Marlingate Pier pantomime.

She had established herself with Susie now in a room on the ground-floor. It would be easier to escape if anything happened, and sounds were muffled by thicker walls. The little girl had for the first time been really frightened by the destruction of Haneholt's Farm, which had made the night lurid and noisy for some hours and had, moreover, produced the only casualties the district had so far known. Her heart fastened on these, the deaths of animals as well as men, and every time a bomb swished over the house or thudded far away, Myra would have to get up and look out of the window, which she kept curtained now, and pretend to see exactly where it had fallen, so that she could tell her it had only made a hole in an empty field and done nobody any harm.

That year the hop-picking started early and a certain difficulty was found in coaxing pickers out of the security of London into the danger-zone of the Kentish border. Ellenwhorne had always employed local pickers, but Pyramus still carried on a tradition surviving from the days when it was a Bewbush farm and imported workers from the East End. This year they had scarcely arrived before they demanded to be sent back. Two days of fighting overhead, two nights of scattered bombing, when furious air-raid wardens stamped out their fires, decided them that neither Kent nor East Sussex was fit for transient habitation.

"This place is well known as Hell's Corner, and you've got no business to bring us here, to say nothing of our wives and kiddies."

Thus an outraged spokesman from the Old Kent Road compelled Toby to send his workers back to town before they had picked an acre. It was the same on other farms, and soon Clearhedge, Crowlink, Loneham, Dew and Maidenbower were driven to the expense of restoring indignant crowds by train and 'bus to the peace of Stepney, Bermondsey, Poplar and Shoreditch.

"What are we to do?" asked Myra.

They were at dinner and Toby had just come in after telephoning to the 'bus company about some detail of the pickers' return. He and Myra seemed to have a tacit agreement to meet only in Susie's presence. In the evenings, when she was in bed and normally they would have settled down to enjoy each other's company, Myra went to bed as early as she decently could after sharing her daughter's evening meal at seven; while Toby, under the pretext of necessity, stayed out on the farm till dark.

"What are we to do?"

He shook his head, looking tired and dejected. He wore now a constantly harassed look which only she knew was not due to the anxieties of farm life and war-time.

"I suppose all the local pickers are absorbed?"

"Every man jack of them."

"Daddy," cried Susie, "I'll help you pick. I pick very fast, you know, and I don't mind the 'planes."

"Thank you, sweetheart—you certainly shall. We'll have a family bin for you and Mummy and Connie and anyone else who has a moment's time."

"I wish we could have Nurse Prosser. Last year she picked thirty bushels a day. But this year she's too busy fighting. And I'm afraid Mrs. Perkins can't help, because her hands are too scratchy—they only tear the hops to pieces."

"Can't we get pickers from Marlingate?" asked Myra.

Toby looked at her in some surprise.

"Haven't you heard? Marlingate's been evacuated."

"Good Lord!—no, I hadn't heard. Does that mean that everybody's left the town? What's happened to Sibylla?"

"It's not compulsory, but I believe two-thirds of the population have left. I'm surprised your sister didn't ring you up and tell you."

"I know why she didn't," said Myra grimly; "it's because she hasn't gone. If she hasn't been forced to go, she's stayed—I know her; and she probably didn't like to ring me up, knowing what I'd say. When did all this happen?"

"Oh, only a day or two ago—in fact, I believe it's still happening. The people are being taken off in special trains to Somerset—those who haven't made any private arrangements. Just a few of the old

hop-picking families have come out here, but Lusted told me they'd only got half their usual workers, and it's the same at Lordaine."

"Then what are *we* to do?"

That question remained unanswered during the next few days of scramble and despair. It was impossible to collect more than a handful of pickers, though even grandmothers and toddling children were bribed into service at fantastic prices. Myra, Toby, Thorne, Brazier, Barnes, Strudgate, Connie, Susie, old Mrs. Street from Ellenwhorne —hardy and active in spite of a recent seventy-fifth birthday—the Rector and his wife, anyone however inexperienced who was willing and able, toiled from the morning till the evening dew. All other farmwork and housework was neglected. It was impossible even to provide proper meals, and the workers lived on milk and beer and bread and cheese—and still the unpicked alleys drooped ahead, it seemed for miles. . . .

Then suddenly the problem was solved, all difficulties were removed and the hop harvest on Pyramus and many other farms was saved—by the German air-force. The main battlefield shifted from Kent and Sussex to London—Stepney, Bermondsey, Poplar and Shoreditch were bombed into rubbish-heaps, and their inhabitants streamed out into the only country that they knew. Soon the south-eastern farms were besieged by pickers, begging to be taken back. No more talk of Hell's Corner now . . . Hell's Corner was peace and rest and safety after what they had left behind them. The difference between town blitz and country blitz could not have been more strikingly proclaimed. "Besides," as a Stepney barman said to Toby, "'ere we gets a chance of 'itting back at 'im"; and certainly those Nazi airmen who baled out over the hop-gardens had some unpleasant experiences.

By this time Myra was so exhausted that she had almost ceased to feel. Disturbed nights and days full of toil and emergency had acted upon her like a drug, and she had lived through most of them as a being apart from herself. It was the same sensation as she had had when she was under morphia a few hours after Susie's birth—she felt beside her body rather than inside it, with it rather than within it. She might almost have said, I don't know if Myra's still unhappy—I dare say she is—but I don't care. I'm going to get the dinner.

It had become a habit for her and Toby to avoid each other, and recent conditions made it simple enough. Meals had appeared to go on all day—there were no fixed hours or inevitable encounters. Doubt-

less if he and she had been on their old terms they would have seized opportunities, snatched occasional moments to consult or refresh each other; but as things were, they could live almost entirely apart without comment except from themselves.

Now that, with the pickers at work, life was inclined to become more normal, she found herself actually dreading a return to the old ways, which must sooner or later expose them to each other and even to the world. In her present dazed condition she shrank from the effort involved in facing her own life again, of returning to her own personal battlefield. Sometimes she found herself almost wishing that the old ways might never come back, that the old world might be destroyed, so that its outward frame could never display her loss. It was like hoping for the house to be burned down to hide the loss of a picture, and when she caught herself in this mood she would feel ashamed, seeing further signs of that self-enlargement which had already made such a mess of other lives besides her own. If only she could find something that she could never make a convenience of or force to her own ends! . . . It would have to be something bigger than war, bigger than love, since she had forced both these. Religion? —religion stood for childhood's repressions, maternal lectures, hours of boredom in a pitch-pine pew. Yet at the bottom of her heart was a feeling that only religion could have saved her from doing what she had done and only religion could enable her in some degree to undo it.

More than anything in the world she longed to undo what she had done to Toby. . . . His fagged, drawn face and constant air of weariness and preoccupation were a reproach she could scarcely endure, knowing well that none of his war-time cares and struggles could alone account for the change in him.

His mother had noticed it, and Myra was still fond of Toby's mother, though her affection had the discoloured edge of all her family feelings at the moment.

"I can't help being worried about Toby, dear. He seems strained . . . he must be terribly overdriven, for it isn't like him to worry like this. I suppose it's being out so much at night and not getting his proper sleep. . . . Couldn't you possibly get him away for a few days?"

"Mother, how could I?"

"No, of course not. You're both much too busy here. But I can't help thinking how nice it would be if you and he could go and have a

real good holiday at your sister Kitty's place—such a change for you both. And you could take Susie too. . . . I've heard Shropshire's a lovely county—with mountain air."

Myra's eyes filled with tears of sheer nostalgia at the thought of such a plan.

"It would be lovely for us all, but it can't be done. We're tied here till the winter, as far as I can see, and probably longer."

"I know, dear. I was only dreaming. . . . I hate to see you both looking so tired and worn. Joe's going to speak to Toby about taking on a land girl. He's engaging one himself, as we can't carry on with two men in the Home Guard and the others in the Observation Corps."

"They've got a land girl at Crowlink, and I hear she's pretty useful."

She was glad to be able to lead away the conversation from herself and Toby and their altered looks.

During all this time she had only at intervals remembered her sister Sibylla. Sometimes when she was busy in the kitchen or on the farm the thought would flash into her mind that as soon as she had a bit of leisure she ought to ring her up. But when the leisure came she always forgot to do so—and after all, what did it matter? It was Sibylla who should have rung *her* up—to announce her departure or, more likely, to explain her persistence in Marlingate. By this time Myra was practically sure that she had not gone away, and was well aware of the hopelessness of any effort on her part to make her do so. She was a tiresome, obstinate old thing . . . here she would call herself to order, knowing well that her main grudge against Sibylla had nothing to do with her obstinacy.

It was this bit of self-knowledge which finally sent her to the telephone. She ought not to neglect her sister—leave her unadvised and unopposed in her folly—just because she had innocently fired a powder-train that Myra herself had laid. It was now more than a week since she had heard of the evacuation of Marlingate. Other considerations apart, it would seem odd to her neighbours and the rest of the Street family if she knew nothing of Sibylla's whereabouts.

The call was answered, as she had expected, in her sister's voice. "Hullo! Hullo! Who is it?"

"Sibylla, this is Myra speaking. I've only just heard about Marlingate being evacuated"—she must allow herself this stretch of truth.

"I'm surprised that you're still there. Why haven't you gone away with everyone else?"

"Everyone isn't going. It's a purely voluntary arrangement, for people who haven't any roots in the town."

"Surely it's for people who haven't any work or real reason for staying. I hear that more than two-thirds have left."

"Oh, they're mostly young people without any responsibilities. I think it's rather disgraceful, if you ask me. Would you believe it, they sent my clothes back from the laundry without washing them? They said all their hands had gone."

"But, Sibylla, they want everyone to go, except the civil defence people and perhaps some of the shopkeepers. They particularly don't want anyone who's at all elderly left in the town."

She was quite prepared for Sibylla to say indignantly, "I'm not elderly," but her sister's rejoinder was:

"A nice thing it would be for Marlingate if all the old-established families left directly there was any danger."

"But what use can you be if there's danger? You can't help at all. You'll only get in the way."

"I can die like my father's daughter," said Sibylla firmly.

Myra nearly gave up the conversation in despair.

"You won't look very like your father's daughter if you never have your clothes washed," was all she could think of to say.

"Oh, that's all right. I've found a woman who'll do my things if I take them there myself—a woman in Bozzum Square."

Myra could have pointed out that this again was very unlike her father's daughter. Bozzum Square being a slum at the back of Fish Street, mainly populated before the last war by Italian organ-grinders and completely out of bounds for the young ladies of Monypenny Crescent. But her chief preoccupation was of another kind.

"Are you all alone? Has Minnie gone?"

"No, indeed. Minnie preferred to stay with me."

That'll be nice for the authorities, thought Myra, if there's an invasion—an old lady of seventy and a half-witted servant-girl. Aloud she said:

"And what about Violet Faircloth? Is she staying behind too?"

"No," and there was a snap of malice in Sibylla's voice. "Violet's run away."

"I don't think you ought to call it that. She's doing what she's

been asked to do, and what you ought to do. Why on earth didn't you go away together?"

"She went with the Pym-Barretts. They were going to a place near Salisbury. I didn't fancy it."

"Well, you know you can always go to Georgie or Kitty. Or you could come here. Why don't you come here, Sibylla? Then you can feel that you're near home and can keep an eye on Monypenny Crescent."

"It isn't worth moving just to go ten miles inland. If there's an invasion, you'd be in it too."

"We should be ten miles farther away, which would give us time to move out. We don't live on the beach like you."

But she had said the wrong thing.

"You know I don't live on the beach, Myra. You know that no gentlepeople live anywhere near the beach in Marlingate, and Monypenny Crescent must be at least half a mile inland."

Myra gave up. She was doing no good and beginning to lose her temper.

"Very well. I won't say any more—at present. After all, if there really is an invasion, I expect you'll be compulsorily evacuated long before it happens."

"There won't be an invasion."

"I hope you're right, but how do you know?"

"The man wouldn't be such a fool—not even him. And if he does come, as I said before, it would give him a very bad impression of the British people if all the decent families had left the town."

"Good-bye, my dear—I really must ring off now. I've got the hens to feed."

You naughty, silly, obstinate old woman, she mumbled to herself as she hung up the receiver. Then found herself surprisingly choking near tears.

Sibylla thought that Violet Faircloth had behaved in a most undignified and cowardly way. It was she who had brought to Monypenny Crescent the news of the town's evacuation. She had burst in, without ringing the bell, just as Sibylla was sitting down to lunch.

"Sibylla, have you seen the notices?"

Sibylla drew herself up. Violet's hat was on one side and her face was purple with exertion.

"No, I haven't seen any notices—and I didn't hear you ring the bell."

It would be quite unendurable if Violet acquired the habit of running into the house without ringing.

"I was in such a hurry that I really couldn't wait. Minnie often takes ages to come to the door. Besides, there's no good fussing about little things like that with this catastrophe that's come upon us."

Sibylla was now forced to ask, "What catastrophe?"

"The evacuation. We're all to be evacuated."

Sibylla turned pale. Her eyes seemed to fill with the loved, familiar room, as if she mysteriously saw the whole of it, even the part behind her.

"Why?—when? . . ." she faltered.

"Because of the invasion. They expect it any moment now. The posters said 'We shall defend this town street by street' . . ."

"Oh! . . ." said Sibylla.

Violet sat down and as she did so her hat fell off, but instead of putting it on again she fanned herself with it.

"It really was terrible outside the Town Hall. I'd gone down to see if I couldn't get some Sopio flakes at Budgen's—they said they hadn't got any, but you never can believe them till you've had a look yourself—and there was a huge crowd outside the Town Hall and a police van with a megaphone. I couldn't get near enough to the notice to read more than the large print, but it was up again at the post-office, and I was able to read it properly there."

"What did it say?" asked Sibylla faintly.

"It said 'We shall defend this town street by street'—just as I told you."

"But what else?"

"Don't be so impatient, Sibylla. Wait a moment till I get my breath. I'm nearly dead after running up all those stairs; but I felt you ought to know at once."

"I'm very grateful to you," lied Sibylla. She would rather have had almost anybody break the news to her than Violet.

"I've been expecting this to happen ever since I heard the Hastings people were to go. It didn't seem reasonable to send them away and keep us here."

"But where are we going to? Did the proclamation say? And how are we to get there?"

Before Violet could answer, another voice—huge, booming, metallic, unnatural—joined in the conversation from outside the window.

“Your attention is urgently called to the notices concerning the evacuation of this town which have been affixed to the Town Hall and other prominent places. You are asked to read them with as little delay as possible.”

“Oh! What was that?” cried Sibylla.

“That’s the police van—it’s been following me around all the morning.”

The voice went braying past the end of Monypenny Crescent and up Rye Lane—the voice of the angel with the trumpet on Judgement Day.

“I’d better go down to the Town Hall at once,” said Sibylla, rising.

“You needn’t go now; I can tell you exactly what it said.”

“What did it say?”

“It said, ‘We shall defend this town street by street.’ ”

“I know. But what else?”

“Don’t be so impatient. I’m giving you the large print first. There was a lot more about the necessity for people leaving and what would be done to help them go. A citizens’ bureau has been opened to give information and there are to be special trains and free petrol.”

“And where are we all to go to?”

“Anywhere we like if we go now—that is, people like ourselves. There’s to be a sort of free evacuation to billets in a safe area for the working-classes. But people like us can go where they please and take what they please with them, as long as they go now. If they wait till the invasion starts, they won’t be able to take anything with them but a small suit-case and will have to go where they’re sent.”

“Then we can stay behind if we want to.”

“Surely nobody would want to stay till the invasion starts.”

“But it may not start at all.”

“What nonsense, Sibylla! Everyone says it’s bound to start some time this autumn.”

“I don’t believe it will. If he’d been coming he’d have come directly after Dunkirk, when there was nothing between him and London but that old Citroën car across the road at Marlpost. Now

they've got proper road-blocks every few miles, and the beach is covered with barbed wire. He couldn't possibly land there."

"Everybody but you thinks he will, or they wouldn't spend all this money on emptying the town. Only think what it'll cost to billet all those thousands of people."

"It's only a chance—and no doubt they're right to provide for it—but it's not a certainty."

Sibylla was recovering her wits now that she knew the evacuation scheme was not compulsory. She had at least the choice of staying where she was, and the realization was an exquisite relief; but she would not betray this relief to Violet.

"Well, I'll go down and read the notice when I've finished my lunch. I'd better have that now, or it'll get cold."

She swallowed an unappetizing mouthful of congealed fish.

"Did you get that at Gallop's?" asked Violet. "They told me they'd nothing but salt cod."

"They had some plaice first thing this morning. You must have rung up too late."

"I rang up at nine. I should have thought that was early enough to please anybody, but Mrs. Gallop's had a grudge against me ever since I pointed out that mistake in her book. I don't see why she should be allowed to get away with an overcharge, even if it is only ninepence halfpenny."

"Well, we'll meet again soon, I suppose."

There was not enough fish to offer to Violet and she preferred to eat her meal without a spectator.

"Oh, yes . . . I must be going now. But we'd better see each other soon and talk this over. Can you come to tea?"

Sibylla hesitated. She saw a controversy ahead and wished to avoid it, even though she realized it was inevitable.

"I could come tomorrow."

"My dear, much better come today. Every moment's precious. We must make some plan at once—where we're to go, and if we're going to ask anyone else to come with us."

"Anyone else? Who are you thinking of?"

"Well, I met Rosalind Pym-Barrett in the town today, and she was desperately worried about poor Bertie. So it struck me that it wouldn't be a bad idea if we all went away together to some nice

place. We could hire a car—it wouldn't be so much if we divided the fare—and we're all such old friends."

Sibylla said nothing, but her mind took a further tilt in the direction in which it was leaning.

When she had finished her lunch, which was about ten minutes later, for she was anxious to see things for herself and Minnie's cooking was not the sort that tempted one to linger over a meal, she put on her hat and took the 'bus down to the Town Hall. She always travelled by 'bus now, even committing the extravagance of getting in at the end of Monypenny Crescent instead of at the French Gun. For the High Street 'bus still had its reassuring quality and would, she felt, dodge the bombs much better than she could. There had not been any bombs on Marlingate for a week, but Sibylla always felt that she took her life in her hands every time she went out.

There were not many people round the Town Hall and she was able to read the notice quite easily. It said very much what Violet had stated. All those who could go were asked to go at once, but there was no threat of compulsion at the moment, though that might come later. It reminded Sibylla of the recruiting posters in the last war which said "Will you come freely now or wait till you're fetched?"—except that in this case compulsion might never happen at all. There was always a chance that Hitler would feel unequal to the enterprise of capturing the British Isles; and if there was no invasion, those people who had fled from their homes would feel very small and cowardly, and those who had stayed behind would be in an infinitely superior position both as householders and as patriots.

Certainly she did not like the idea of going away with the Pym-Barretts. Poor Bertie was a terrible bore, and Rosalind had become quite an old woman lately—full of such silly ideas. . . . Sibylla could not get on with her at all. But to go away with Violet alone would not be much better. They would never find a place to stay in that suited them both. Of course she could go to stay with Georgie or Kitty, but the objections which had restrained her earlier had only gained in strength. Of the two she now felt more inclined towards Kitty, who had written her a very cordial letter only a fortnight ago, inviting her to come and make Cumberbatch Hall her home. But at Cumberbatch there were no "church privileges"—the parish church was very Low, and any form of religious compromise seemed

too high a price to pay for safety. Even the bombs had not been able to stop her going to St. Nicholas' and take the shorter way to All Hallows'.

There was another reason for staying in Marlingate—she would still have St. Nicholas' Church. She had been going there now for over thirty years. It was as deeply sanctified by pleasure and by pain as the town itself. If she went away, she might not be able to find such a good church anywhere, and no church could be the same as St. Nicholas'. She needed her church more than ever in these days of trouble and turmoil, and it would be terrible to find herself away not only from her material home but from her spiritual one.

Her mind was now slowly settling itself in the direction it had taken, and by the time next day when she went to tea with Violet to "discuss plans" it was quite made up. She would not leave—at present (the time qualification was a concession both to Violet's insistence and her own fears). She would wait, she said, and see what happened. It would look better, too, if all the old residents (now limited almost entirely to Violet, herself and the Pym-Barretts, for the Gallops and Pelhams and Lewnses who had lived in the Old Town for countless generations could not be thought of as belonging to this category) did not leave Marlingate in a bunch. As for her share in the expenses of the car, she was the only one of the party who could not afford if necessary to pay the whole fare.

Violet argued, bullied, reproached, exhorted (as a substitute for entreaty), launched an attack on St. Nicholas' Church—this time from the altitude of the World Congress of Faiths—painted a terrible picture of German atrocities and hinted that no age was too old for rape; but Sibylla, though as usual her flesh tingled in every pore in response to Violet's desire to make it creep, stood firm, and finally went home in a great state of nervous irritation but with her future still in her own hands.

It was not till she actually reached home that she realized her hand might be forced from another side. Suppose Minnie chose to obey the municipal exhortation to depart? . . . Quite possibly her family would avail themselves of the offer of a free holiday and become submerged in the tide of Marlingate's desertion. Sibylla had a moment of terrible qualm. If Minnie did not stay, she herself would be obliged to go, for she did not suppose that in such a crisis she would be able to engage another servant. She had never even learned

to boil an egg or make a piece of toast; her domestic activities had gone no further than the occasional flicking with a whisk of many coloured feathers those treasured objects which Minnie, though deeply admiring, seemed impelled to destroy. Certainly she could not exist for a week without a servant; so ultimately on Minnie rather than on herself or Violet or Hitler the future depended.

However, her fears were dispelled almost as soon as they were roused. Minnie did not want to go away and was very pleased to hear that Miss Landless had no intention of doing so. The very circumstances that Sibylla had thought might induce her proved a discouragement instead. She did not like the idea of going away with her family and becoming an evacuee, which she regarded as an almost sub-human species.

“Lor’, miss, we should be no better than those people from London.”

“Well, Minnie, I’m relieved to know you feel like that, but I thought perhaps you’d like to be with your father and mother.”

“Lor’, no, miss. I don’t take no count of them. I like being here with you, miss.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Minnie. But please remember to call me ‘ma’am.’”

“Ma’am, miss.”  
“And of course it’s only fair to tell you that if you go away there won’t be any bombs, but if you stay here we may have a great many.”

“Lor’, I don’t take no count of them, miss—ma’am, I should say, miss.”

With Minnie at her side, Sibylla felt almost secure in Mony-penny Crescent, though it was a sharp blow to find that both her tenants on the ground and top floors were leaving, apparently with clear consciences. To make matters worse, Marlingate had now come under a moratorium (which Sibylla’s mind could not quite sort out from an interdict), making it impossible for her to claim any rent from the defaulters till after the war. However, she told herself, this only made it all the more necessary that she herself should stay at home, as she certainly could not now afford the expense of going away. She would be quite all right with the family in the basement, whose municipal labours compelled at least the male part to stay

behind; and she was mercifully spared that male part's comments on her continued residence.

Two days later Violet Faircloth went away to Wiltshire with the Pym-Barretts. She and Sibylla parted quite good friends; indeed Sibylla went to the station to see them off, for in the end it turned out that every possible car in Marlingate was already booked for several days ahead, and it was a question either of waiting or of travelling by train. Just as the guard was going to blow his whistle a porter mistakenly tried to make Sibylla get in with the others.

"Now, then, lady, we're going to start."

"I'm not travelling," said Sibylla in a superior voice, hoping that Violet at least would overhear. "I'm not going to pay Hitler the compliment of running away from him."

This did not go down quite so well as it had on an earlier occasion.

"My wife and kids ain't going to pay him the compliment of waiting to shake hands with him when he lands on the beach."

"I certainly shan't do that," said Sibylla, "and my own opinion is that he won't come at all."

"I'm sure I hope you're right, lady, and the Prime Minister's wrong."

Sibylla hoped so too, in spite of her braggard air.

From that day a new, rather strange life began for Sibylla. She had of course expected the evacuation to make certain changes in her daily routine, but she had only dimly visualized what they might be. She was not surprised to find the town looking empty. It had been only thinly populated all the summer. But that emptiness had been relative—now at certain moments and in certain streets it seemed absolute.

She had felt a sudden chill when, standing one afternoon at the top of High Street and looking towards the Marine Parade, she had realized that there was no one in the street but herself. The high pavements heaved and sloped their way untrodden to the sea—not a shopper, not a stroller was to be seen, and not a single car stood waiting. Now she came to think of it, she had never before had this full, blue view of the sea lying there at the gate of the street, with apparently all the sunshine in the world caught up on its dancing, dazzling plain. There had always been people and cars and delivery vans to crowd the foreground and block the distance. But now

she had the curious feeling of being in a landscape rather than in a town—her own solitude seemed to turn the street into a gorge, the houses into rocks. . . . A woman came slipping almost furtively out of the Town Hall and at the same moment Mr. Budgen could be seen bowing a solitary customer out of his stores. The spell was broken, but while it lasted Sibylla had felt really afraid—of something that had nothing to do with bombs or 'planes or the German Army waiting only just out of sight.

Soon she had forgotten the empty streets in her preoccupation with the way their emptiness affected her own life. She had not realized what it would be like without those hitherto almost unnoticed satellites and auxiliaries that used to turn its wheels. There had been the terrible episode of the laundry, and there was also the day when ringing up Budgen's with her usual order she had been answered by Mr. Budgen in person telling her that he was extremely sorry, but he had no errand-boys left and that if she wanted anything he was afraid she must fetch it herself. A number of the shops had closed, some because they could not get assistants, others because they had lost nearly all their customers. In church on Sunday there was no choir and less than a quarter of the usual congregation.

It was a queer, empty, lonely world in which Sibylla found herself. Her eyes soon became used to open vistas and closed houses, her ears to the sound of a single set of footsteps on the pavement—footsteps that could be heard tramping or pattering all the way from the top to the bottom of the street. After a time even the traffic lights disappeared, the small amount of traffic making them an unnecessary expense to the municipality. Then, to Sibylla's real concern, the High Street 'bus halved the number of its journeys into the town, just when her shopping and laundry difficulties made her more than ever in need of its protection.

But apart from this and a slight uneasiness caused by the discovery that only one other house besides her own in Monypenny Crescent was still occupied, she was not unhappy—indeed she often felt thankful that she had not yielded to panic and gone away with the others. Her home seemed all the dearer to her now that its upkeep absorbed so much of her daring, and as for the town she thought it positively improved by such a drastic purge of its inhabitants.

"Nobody could complain now," she wrote to Violet, "that Marlingate was becoming vulgar. In fact you could really call it select,

and if it wasn't so empty I could imagine myself back in the dear old days when we were all girls before the Boer War."

Her shopping expeditions were not so disagreeable and alarming as she had feared. The Germans obligingly refrained from bombing High Street while she was in it and it seemed to her that she had acquired a new importance in the eyes of tradespeople. Mr. Budgen always served her in person now, instead of leaving her to his assistants—a delegation which had often caused heartburning and resentment in an old customer like herself. His attentions may have been due to the reduced numbers both of his staff and of his customers, but Sibylla liked to think that it was because he appreciated her loyalty and patriotism in remaining in the town. He had as good as said so when she repeated her remark about not paying Hitler the compliment of running away from him. He had said: "I wish there were more like you, mum," and looked at her very respectfully.

Thus the early days of September passed, while Marlingate waited for it knew not what. Some expected an intensified bombing, others nothing less than invasion itself. To Sibylla it seemed that the air-raids were less frightening than they used to be—partly because recent ones had been concentrated on the remoter neighbourhood of the Totty Lands, where she never went and knew nobody, partly no doubt because now she was free of Violet's enlarging commentary. As for the invasion, every day that went by without it seemed to put it back another year. Surely Hitler would never come when the sea was rough and lashing against the Marine Parade—his flat-bottomed barges would be overturned and his soldiers would all be too sea-sick to fight. Sibylla had a most encouraging vision of drowned and dying Nazis lying on the beach, and one day in the High Street actually waived her umbrella when she remembered the words "And Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea-shore."

Sometimes at night she would feel less comfortable. Wakened out of a confused dream by the 'planes growling over Marlingate on their way to London, she would find in her head a very different set of words. "We shall defend this town street by street." There were soldiers in Marlingate—only a few, but she knew there were many more in the country outside it—and if Hitler landed, those soldiers would fight. There would be guns firing from All Holland Hill and Cuckoo Hill, machine-guns chattering on the Parade and in the Marine Gardens, snipers on the roof of the Assembly Room

and the Marine Hotel. Every street would be barricaded and defended . . . street by street . . . the Battle of High Street, the Battle of Fish Street, the Battle of Zurial Place—of the Coney Banks—of Mount Idle—of Bozzum Square—of Pelham Square. . . . Street by street . . . she saw the Germans creeping nearer, till at last came the Battle of Monypenny Crescent, with herself looking out of the window—or would she have gone away by then? Probably by that time there would be compulsory evacuation. A greater lucidity came with day—lucidity and confidence. She was sure then that she had acted rightly in refusing to leave the town. “I like to think,” she sometimes said to herself as she dressed—“I like to think that dear Father and Mother would have approved of what I’m doing.”

Apart from dear Father and Mother and possibly Mr. Budgen, she found a disappointing tendency to blame rather than approve of her. Everybody seemed determined if possible to make her change her mind. Her air-raid warden called, her sister Myra rang up, her sisters Kitty and Georgie wrote urgently, even little Joyce Yeoveney wrote and begged her to go away—and for a moment Sibylla had felt shaken by the realization that as Mrs. Yeoveney and her sisters had left the town with the official evacuation party to Somersetshire, she could not expect her little friend to come and see her on her next leave. But not even Joyce could move Sibylla now. Nothing had happened in Marlingate to make her regret her choice, and Violet had written a most discouraging letter from Wiltshire—she was extremely uncomfortable, everything was terribly expensive, the hotel was crowded with the most ghastly people, her bed wasn’t made till the afternoon, she could never get a comfortable chair in the lounge after dinner, and the Pym-Barretts were quite impossible to live with. No, taking everything into consideration, Sibylla was glad to be where she was now—alone and in danger, but free and comfortable in her own home.

Sometimes, too, as she stood at her window looking down at the streets below—where there were so many smokeless chimneys that the immemorial haze had vanished from the roofs and the scars of enemy bombing were revealed—she would feel almost a personal love for the town, abandoned by so many in its hour of need. Poor town!—the crowds that had flocked there to find health and fun in happier years had all deserted it, just because it was threatened with invasion for the first time since 1066. (She had forgotten Napoleon

now, and anyway there was no reason to think the Marlingate of those days had paid him the compliment she refused to pay Hitler.) The sun shone as softly as ever through the September mists, the September breezes in the streets were just as warm and gay, but there was only a handful of people to enjoy them—people no doubt like herself, who had lived so much of her life in those streets that to leave them would be almost like leaving her body and a foretaste of death.

Her days soon fell into a new pattern that seemed nearly as good as the old. She now spent much more time indoors, as not only had she given up her daily window-shopping in High Street (which, indeed, had not many windows left), but she no longer had the doubtful substitute of her strolls with Violet Faircloth and her visits to the house in Rye Lane. Nor were there now any of those social engagements, already declined to a few lustreless tea-parties, that had taken her to such rare houses as still remained suitably tenanted in Becket Grove or Pelham Square. She seldom went out, except to do her shopping on two mornings a week, in combination with the delivery and collection of her laundry—threading her away from High Street to Bozzum Square through fish-smelling passages whose very existence had been unknown to her a year ago, under the walls of tarry cottages that leaned together over her head. She also went to church on Sundays, comforted by the double protection of the High Street 'bus, which gave her its old reassurance that nothing could hurt her while she was inside, and of St. Nicholas' Church, which spoke in a different voice, telling her that her fears were only a child's fears in the dark, and that if a bomb were to fall on her there it would mean nothing worse than the end of darkness.

Apart from these descents into the town, required by the needs of her body and her soul, she spent the greater part of her days at home. There seemed no sense in wandering about by herself, but at home there was always plenty to do—not only her "housework," as she called the feather dusting, but much turning out of old boxes and trunks, which she had never had time for till now. Her store of beloved objects was augmented by the discovery of old books, old music, old photographs, old clothes.

It was almost like a return to happy days gone by to find photographs of herself with head and shoulders emerging from a tulle

ball-dress or in a striped, tightly buttoned bodice and bunchy skirt with Myra as a baby on her knee. There was a wicked snapshot of Violet, too, paddling at the Stussels with her skirts lifted almost to her thighs, and many photographs of Kitty, including one of her as Patience, with her eyes like stars and her hair like bubbles under her wide-brimmed milkmaid's hat. Sibylla searched for one of herself as the Lady Saphir, but found instead only one of Georgie looking very plain as a Lovesick Maiden and Bertie Pym-Barrett looking quite ridiculous as the Duke of Dunster.

She remembered then that she had torn up her photograph together with the score, and felt sorry for it. It would have been nice to see herself again in those becoming clothes. She had really been a beautiful girl, just as beautiful as Kitty, only in a different style—tall and dark and handsome . . . Mr. Pickney's "Miss Juno." . . . She used sometimes to tell Minnie about the old gay days—for Minnie was all she had to talk to now—tell her how beautiful she used to be and how the gentlemen used to admire her; and Minnie had said—"Lor', miss, who'd have thought it?"

Minnie was sometimes very stupid and not really satisfactory as a companion, but she was always ready to listen to stories of bygone years when Marlingate was gay, and laugh at the funny clothes the ladies wore in the photographs. She also made a most appreciative audience when Sibylla played the piano, an accomplishment she had revived now that she had so little else to do. The old Collard upright had not been played for years and was decidedly out of tune, but on it she could revive memories beyond the reach of the photographer.

She had actually discovered a score of *Patience*—the one which had belonged to Georgie and had lain forgotten at the bottom of an old trunk in the attic for forty years. Now she could play all the dear old tunes to herself and Minnie, even finding sometimes enough voice to sing a bar or two, though soon the notes would quaver into a cough.

"I'm out of practice now, of course, Minnie, but I had a very good voice when I was young—much better than Miss Faircloth's. Everybody said I ought to have had her part. However, the Lady Saphir suited me very well. This was one of my songs, Minnie:

*Though so excellently wise,  
For a moment mortal be,*

*Deign to raise thy purple eyes  
From thy heart-drawn poesy.  
Twenty love-sick maidens see—  
Each is kneeling on her knee!*

“Lor’, miss, your cough *is* bad. Let me get you a glass of water.”

“Thank you, Minnie. It might be a good idea for me to have a glass of water always on the piano, for I enjoy singing now and then.”

“And I’m sure, miss, I enjoy hearing you, though I like the notes best, miss.”

“Ma’am, Minnie.”

“Ma’am, miss.”

## VI

SEPTEMBER moved in golden warmth over its own centre towards summer’s end. The earth, except in her actual scars, seemed drowsily to ignore the tumult in the sky; only the terrified birds, skimming to and fro just above the ground, protested against the invasion of their element. Corn and hops and fruit ripened and were gathered. At last the workers’ tired hands might fall into their laps.

By a noticeable parallel the battle also decreased. Though the earth had not heeded the sky, the sky must heed the earth when out of the compost of her fruitfulness she brewed mists to cover the landing-grounds and when at last she sent up the equinoctial gales to rattle the stars. The crisis came with the climacteric of the month, on a day when a hundred and eighty-five of the enemy fell out of the sky above south-east England.

That had been the day on which, by a common consent of rumour in those parts, the invasion was to begin. That night mothers had slept with their children in their arms, waking in the darkness to hear the first sob of the gale outside the house and the first tears of rain pattering on the window after the long drought. All the earth seemed to be weeping with the relief of a great dread. By dawn the skies were grey and the seas breaking wildly on the unassaulted beaches.

After that the battle began to fail. It continued sporadically throughout the autumn, especially over London and the big towns at night, but it had lost its immediate threat of a danger greater than

its own. Sibylla had been right; Hitler would not come—not that year.

It was in the third week of the month—on a day which was April in the sky, with travelling showers and a light wind toppling the clouds, but September on the earth with hedges like walls of fire round the dun fields where the tractors sang hoarsely of next year's harvest—that Myra realized she had lost her cover of big events and must face up again to her own littleness. The hops and the fruit were picked, the corn was threshed, the autumn ploughing was taking a leisurely course through the right weather, while at the same time came fewer air-raid warnings and a better organization of civil defence, which no longer snatched much-wanted men from essential work at undisciplined hours. Barnes and Strudgate had their regular times on duty at the fire-station, and the Home Guard kept its appointed watches. Toby now slept four whole nights a week at home.

She saw that she would either have to restore her life to its earlier conditions or accept its present conditions as normal. Soon she would find it impossible to avoid having meals alone with Toby, and though the continued visits of bombers at night, with a sporadic dropping of bombs, especially in bad weather, made it advisable still to keep Susie sleeping near her on the ground-floor, there was no reason why Toby should not join them there on the nights he slept at home. They could have the big room underneath their own, while Susie slept in the little adjoining one, as she had done upstairs.

To go on as they were now, though the actual need was over, would be to proclaim and perpetuate their estrangement, and with all the strength of vision that was hers she saw that this must not happen. She realized too that during those days of stress and labour, when it had seemed that she had no time to think or energy to feel, she had really been thinking and feeling quite a lot. Indeed now that she was compelled to face her problem, she saw that she had already in a measure solved it.

She saw how much of their marriage still remained. In her first despair she had thought its roots destroyed, but now she realized that only the top growth was gone. She was thankful then for Toby's old-fashioned integrity which had kept those roots in the soil when a less rigorously minded man would have got rid of them with the rest. If she and Toby had been a young, modern couple he would probably have offered to give her grounds for divorce, or she would

have asked him to do so. But as things were, she knew that the idea had not entered his head. It had entered hers, but she had not expressed it, guessing how much further it must sink her in his esteem. There had indeed been times when their present detached way of living had seemed more terrible than any divorce, but now she saw in it a hope of at least a partial restoration.

At the back of Ellenwhorne there was a double-stemmed chestnut tree, which a local tradition said had once been a single trunk, but which an enemy of the farm had cut down in the night, beheading all the growth of branches, leaves and flowers, leaving only a stump. From this stump had sprung the two limbs that had now made nearly as fine a tree as the one that had been destroyed. She must look upon that tree as the symbol of her marriage. An enemy—herself of twenty years ago—had cut it down, but in it was still the power of the living root, the sap that could recreate the broken form and restore the beauty that was lost.

That evening she deliberately waited till Toby was in before she sat down to supper, which was laid, as in old times, for two.

"Now that it gets dark so early," she said to Connie, "and there isn't so much to do out of doors, the Master will want his supper at the usual time and I'll have it with him. I can say good-night to Susie before we begin."

She wondered if Toby would be annoyed when he saw her waiting there; but decided almost immediately that he must want this indeterminate state of affairs to end as much as she did. He was too simple and direct to be able to take cover for long in avoidance and silence, though he might be temperamentally slower than she was in coming to the point of speech. He must know too that soon it would be impossible to maintain their remoteness from each other without involving other people besides themselves.

She watched him, therefore, more carefully than anxiously as he came into the lamplit room where she sat alone. But her heart was beating high with another sort of alarm. She did not think he would resent her having brought the situation to a climax, but would that climax after all lead to a solution? How stiff would she find him?—how unwilling to forgive?—how unable to forget? How far was he still unadjusted to the knowledge that Bernard was not his son? After all, Bernard's existence still made it impossible to isolate the past. . . .

She suddenly lost hope, fearing that a blow had been struck at the root of the tree as well as at the branches.

"Hullo, not had your supper yet?"

The lamp was on the table, lighting the still life of salad and fruit, of the loaf and the cheese and the rabbit-pie and the big brown jug of beer. As he sat down, his face came into the glow and she was in a measure comforted to see that it wore an expression of relief.

"No," she said. "I thought you'd be in early, as it's got so dark, and it's really more convenient for us to have it together."

"Is Susie in bed?"

"Yes; I said good-night to her half an hour ago."

"She'll be asleep, then? I'd better not go in now?"

"Perhaps not tonight—but another night, if you could manage to be just a little earlier . . ."

He said, "I will"; and suddenly they seemed to meet again beside their child, to be united there as they had been before, though strangers everywhere else. She thought too that he had spoken of Susie deliberately, so that they could have this meeting.

"These hop-pickers are making things rather awkward."

She had felt for a moment so close to him that it was a surprise to find him still hiding from her in outside matters, but she realized that he might be shy of the atmosphere he had created, and wanting to accustom himself to breathing it before moving any further.

"What are the hop-pickers doing? I thought they'd gone away."

"Most of them have, but not all. There's quite a number left in the Furnace huts—two families who've lost their homes in Bermondsey, and another lot who are scared to go back. It's the same at Maidenbower and Crowlink—in fact all the farms who employ East End people. A certain number don't want to go home, and I don't blame 'em."

"Nor do I. Can't they be allowed to stay?"

"Certainly not. Both the M.O.H. and the police object to that. The huts aren't adapted for more than camping; they couldn't possibly live in them all the winter, and they can't go into billets, for this is a restricted area and not allowed to take evacuees."

"What's going to happen to them, then, poor things? Will they be ordered back to London?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so—certainly not those who've lost their

homes. I believe the plan is to send them away to some reception area under the ordinary evacuation scheme."

"That sounds quite practical. After all, the women and children should have been evacuated from London long ago."

"I believe a great many were, but when the balloon didn't go up they drifted back again. I don't blame them for that, either. You can't expect families to live apart indefinitely."

Without having said a word that couldn't have been said had they not been alone, they seemed suddenly to have stumbled into the intimacies of their own problem. Their eyes met, and each saw that the other had turned red.

"Yes, that was what our evacuee women told me at the beginning of the war," said Myra, annoyed with herself for not being able to take such an obvious opportunity, yet afraid to go further on ground on to which she seemed suddenly to have been tumbled; "they were worried about their homes and their husbands. They were afraid they weren't being properly looked after, or else they were afraid they were being looked after too well—by other women."

"Quite so. And didn't the husbands write and ask them to come back? I mean, the women that we had here . . . that was why they went home, wasn't it?"

"Mrs. Birch left because her husband asked her to, and Mrs. Collins left because she didn't want to stay here without Mrs. Birch."

"Well, at least three months had gone by without any of the dreadful things happening that they had been told would happen, so only naturally they thought they wouldn't ever and that it was useless misery to be parted."

"And useless expense—they had to pay the evacuation fees, those who were in a position to do so."

"I expect their husbands were terribly lonely."

I wish, thought Myra, we could get off this conversation about husbands and wives. And she was just beginning to make some reference to Georgie's experiences with evacuees, when she suddenly realized that Toby's hands were trembling. He was lighting a cigarette, though he was only half-way through his supper, and the hand that held the match was so unsteady that he could hardly manage it. She realized then that he was deliberately moving the conversation in a direction where she was refusing to follow. It was she who was failing, hanging back. . . . She made a desperate effort as she said:

"And the wives, too, Toby. I expect they wanted their husbands more than anything."

She smiled at him as she spoke, but he did not smile back and for a moment her heart seemed to stop beating.

"In their case . . ." he began, and she saw that his courage had failed him. He could not let go of the safeties, even though he had been leading her away from them. It was her turn to venture now. She broke in:

"I've been very lonely without you, Toby. Must we go on like this?"

An expression of relief crossed his face, though still he did not smile.

"You know we can't."

"Then we must go back to our normal lives. It's the only thing for us to do—unless you want to end the marriage altogether."

He turned quite white and put down his cigarette.

"You—you don't want that, do you, Myra?"

"My dear, I said 'unless *you* want' . . ."

"I never dreamed of such a thing."

"Then if we're not going to end it, we must take up our marriage where we left it off."

"That's what I've been wanting to say to you."

It was her turn to experience a deep and penetrating relief, though after all she might have known he would want to say that.

"Then, Toby dear, you really have forgiven me?"

He flushed awkwardly.

"I've nothing to forgive. It's just as you said—you didn't really know me then. You wouldn't have done it if you'd known me as you do now."

Her words were heartfelt as she replied, "I would not."

He continued, his tongue still stumbling, "I mean—if you'd known me then as you do now, you—you'd have trusted me—you'd have told me all about it?"

"My dear, of course I should."

The tears came into her eyes as she realized for the first time that her lack of confidence in him and his love had distressed him as much as her lying. She went on:

"I know I ought to have done that anyhow, but I didn't . . . be-

cause I'd no idea . . . and then afterwards of course it was too late. I simply couldn't bring myself to turn everything upside down."

He nodded gravely.

"I understand that now. Myra, I *have* been trying to understand—please believe me. During these last few weeks I've been thinking over things and I see how dreadfully difficult you must have found them. I couldn't possibly expect . . . Besides, anyhow, as you say, it all happened more than twenty years ago, and it would be wicked to spoil our lives because of something you did before you really knew me. It's only . . . I mean, the only thing I can't get used to is—is—the boy."

His voice, which till then had been low and dry, seemed suddenly to swell and fill with tears like a vessel. Myra felt almost as if her fault had been expiated in the agony of that single moment.

"Toby dear, I know. And that's why you must forgive me, whatever you say. I've done you a dreadful injury and all I can say now is that if there's anything I can do to make things easier . . . Toby, would it make them easier if Bernard knew the truth? If it would, don't think of me."

"But it wouldn't. How could I possibly tell him such a thing about his mother?"

"I know . . ." She faltered at the indignation in his eyes. How difficult it was to understand a just man. "It's only knowing how you hate deception . . ."

"I don't see him so very often now."

"Would you like me to fix for his going to Georgie for his next leave? He'll have his forty-eight hours before so very long, and I know she wants him to go there."

He shook his head.

"No, my dear. We're going back to normal all round—not only with each other. It's the best way. I must get used to seeing Bernard and knowing he's not mine. After all, as I said, he isn't much at home and some day he will marry."

"What about the farm?"

He seemed perplexed.

"Where does that come in?"

"Well, you know how keen he is on it, and you'd thought of him carrying on here with you after the war."

"The war isn't over yet. By the time it is, I'll probably have got

used to the idea of his not being mine. If he's keen on the place, I certainly shan't want to keep him out of it. We're not an old landed family passing on the entail. Bernard has as good a right to Pyramus when I'm gone as any other man; and after all I brought him up and a great many of his ideas are what I gave him."

"That's just it, Toby. In many ways he's far more yours than Lawrie's. After all, Lawrie didn't even know he'd been born till a few weeks ago. He's had nothing to do with him beyond his actual begetting, and that was an accident—something done without knowledge or meaning. I'm ashamed to talk in this way, but I do want you to see that Bernard's much more yours than his. You've known him and loved him since he was a few hours old, you've trained him and brought him up and given him his ideas about things and talked to him and worked with him—oh, surely all that means more than a single irresponsible act committed months before he was born!"

She was surprised to see him smile at last.

"What remarkable things you think of, Myra, and perhaps you're right. I dare say that in time I shall feel like that. I don't now; but I haven't known about it long, and I always was a slow mover. Forgive me, my dear."

"Don't talk to *me* about forgiving *you*."

She rose, and going up to him, put her arms round his neck.

"Toby, say that you forgive me."

"I've told you—I've nothing to forgive."

"Oh, don't say that—that isn't what I want. Say that you forgive me."

"You know that I do."

"But you haven't said it. I want to hear you say 'I forgive you.'"

She wouldn't ask him to add, "and everything shall be as it was before," because that seemed impossible. But some deep urge demanded that he should loose her heart with a form of words—"Say, 'I forgive you.'"

She could feel the words moving under her lips as they covered his.

An hour later they stood together beside Susie's bed. Their bodies stood now where their hearts had always been able to meet through-

out their estrangement. She knew that he was thinking what she thought, though he said nothing about it.

All he said was:

"Well, I must be getting off. I'm due at the post in half an hour."

"And tomorrow I'll move you down here and Susie into the little room. Unless you'd rather we all moved up again."

"If you feel safer on the ground-floor, you'd better stay there."

"I feel it's safer for the child. Things are still sometimes a bit lively at night."

"Yes, and of course she's too small to drop from an upstairs window, as you and I could do quite easily. . . . Poor little woman"—he looked down tenderly at the sleeping face—"I wish she had happier times to live in."

"She's happy in spite of them, and I'm going to do all I can to keep her happy. For one thing I shall make sure that she doesn't grow up like her mother."

"Myra, you're not to say that. I want her to grow up like you, as much like you as possible."

"Not like I was during the last war." She gave him a half-ashamed, half-mischiefous glance. "It's all right—I'm not going to restart the subject; and she can be as like what I'm going to be from now onwards as anyone brought up so differently has any chance of being; but I'm going to give her something I never had."

"What's that?"

She shook her head.

"I'd rather not tell you, for I couldn't explain what I mean. It's something I haven't got, so I'll have to give it to myself first before I can give it to her. But please don't ask me about it just yet."

She did not feel equal to telling him then that what she meant was religion. He would not understand, for to him religion was leading the straight, upright life that he would anyhow have led without it. She could not as yet explain to him that such a religion would be no more use to her than the tactics of the Boer War to the present High Command. Total war . . . total religion. . . . But if she tried to tell Toby that, he would think she meant to turn Susie into something like Sibylla; so she had better say nothing more at present and hope he would be satisfied.

"I shan't ask you to tell me anything you don't want to," he said in his slow, grave voice, and her heart bounded suddenly towards

him in gratitude and devotion. She felt deeply thankful to be married to a man of so few words.

Sibylla had had a letter that had given her the very deepest pleasure. Little Joyce Yeoveney had written to announce that she meant to ignore her mother and aunties in Somersetshire for at least two days of her seven days' leave and come to visit her dear Miss Landless in Marlingate.

“—if you can manage to put me up for the night, as I don't see how I can get from Marlingate to Dulverton in less than a whole day. I can travel by night from here and catch the 9.35 at Charing Cross. I do so want to see you and *tell you something*.”

Sibylla was delighted and plunged into an orgy of preparation, clearing out the spare-room chest of drawers, which normally bulged with relics of the past, hanging up fresh curtains, and pressing out the best embroidered sheets that used to be on dear Mother's bed. She seldom had visitors and was not overfond of them, but Joyce seemed like a daughter—certainly she was dearer than a sister. It would be lovely to have her in the house for a whole twenty-four hours—helping, smiling, talking . . . the child must really be fond of her to come such a long way (all the way from somewhere beyond Blackpool) just to see her—and to “tell her something.” . . . Sibylla guessed what it would be. She had met someone she cared for and who cared for her. She was probably engaged . . . “Prithee, pretty maiden, will you marry me? Hey, but I'm hopeful, willow, willow waly! . . .” Sibylla was singing as she stowed away her mother's best lace blouse in one of the trunks. She almost felt as if she were herself a bride.

Early in the morning of the day Joyce was to come she set out in the High Street 'bus and bought chocolate biscuits and cake and French beans and plums and pears. She even bought two ripe peaches at a shilling each. She had already ordered a chicken at the butcher's and hoped Minnie would not entirely spoil it—doubtless Joyce herself would be able to save it from the worst. She also bought a quart bottle of cider (Joyce loved cider) and a pound box of peppermint creams. One of the advantages of Marlingate's being evacuated was that there was so much in the shops.

One of the disadvantages was that she had to carry everything home herself, and she was feeling very hot and tired by the time she

came to climb the big outside staircase to her front door. It was a day of warm, unwinking sunshine, with a heat-haze over the sea, but so clear inland that even the neglected frontages of Monypenny Crescent seemed to have recovered some of their old whiteness. She was glad the weather would be fine for Joyce, but it was certainly rather trying at the moment. She put down her string bag on the top step with a sigh of relief, and searched for her latch-key.

As she did so she thought she heard voices inside the house. Yes, she had not been mistaken—Minnie was talking to somebody. Joyce must have already arrived—she had caught an earlier train . . . The conjecture became certainty when she opened the door and saw a suit-case in the hall.

“Is that you, dear?” Then her heart sank like a stone. Out of the dining-room walked Violet Faircloth.

“Sibylla! Oh, Sibylla!”

Her voice, her face, her walk were all compounded of tragedy, but Sibylla could make no more adequate response than:

“Hullo! Where *have* you come from?”

“From that dreadful place.”

“What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t possibly stay there any longer. I was starving, and quite exhausted by those impossible people; and when it came to bombs . . . I said I’ve come here and I’ve endured all this to escape from bombs, and if I’m to have them here the same as in Marlingate, then all I can say is that I’d be better off at home.”

“You mean, you’ve left Fullerbury?”

“I came away in the milk-train this morning. I’ve been travelling since daylight. I believe my luggage is still at Reading—I came by Reading and Tonbridge, you know, to avoid London.”

“You mean that you’ve come back for good?”

“Yes—for good. Why should I live at great expense in that shocking hotel with those really *malevolent* Pym-Barretts, when I might just as well be in my own comfortable house? That evacuation scheme was a fraud and imposture, just to get us out of the town. They don’t care what happens to us when we *are* out. We were bombed at Fullerbury just as we were here. They came over yesterday and dropped a stick right across the place—smashed all the back windows of the hotel. I said I might just as well be in Marlingate—and here I am.

Oh, thank you, Minnie—I felt so dead that I asked Minnie to make me a cup of coffee. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. I'll join you—Minnie, is there any left? Let's go and sit down. I'm expecting Joyce Yeoveney in a few minutes." Her eyes fell once more on the suit-case. "I wonder who we can get hold of to take that round for you. Perhaps it isn't too heavy for Minnie to carry."

"Oh, but—" Violet sat down in the dining-room arm-chair and began to stir her coffee. "I was wondering, Sibylla, if you couldn't possibly put me up for a little while, until I'm able to get into Rye Lane. You see, the house is shut up and I haven't got a maid. I shall have to see to things and look round . . ."

"But—" Sibylla's face was pale—"I'm afraid I can't possibly—I've told you. I've got Joyce Yeoveney coming—I expect her at any moment."

"How long is she coming for?"

"Just for tonight, but—"

"Then that's quite all right. She can sleep on the drawing-room sofa. It'll be nothing to her after roughing it in camp all this time. And I've really nowhere else to go. All the hotels are shut, as you know, and I can't possibly go to Rye Lane till it's been aired and swept, and even then I haven't got a maid."

"But, Violet—"

Sibylla could hardly speak, she was so agitated. To have Violet staying with her in the house at any time would be disruptive—to have no escape from her tantrums, her arguments, her fears . . . but to have her in the house when Joyce was there, spoiling their time together—sneering and critical of dear little Joyce as she always was—to have her sleeping in dear Mother's embroidered sheets, sniffing the flowers she had put on the dressing-table, eating the chicken and the peaches and the peppermint creams . . . it would be unendurable—sheer catastrophe.

"I can't have you," she said harshly, emotion making her violent. "You know you don't like Joyce, and I can't ask her to sleep on the sofa. . . . Just because she *has* had a rough time of it I want her to be as comfortable as I can possibly make her. You'll have to go somewhere else."

"But where can I go? Everywhere's shut."

"You shouldn't have come here like this, without warning."

"I tell you I couldn't stay in that dreadful place any longer. We were bombed yesterday."

"We'll probably be bombed here today."

"Well, one expects it here. But when one's evacuated . . . besides, here I shan't have to live with those ghastly Pym-Barretts. Rosalind's senile, Sibylla, positively senile."

"You should have thought of that before you went away with her."

"How could I know what she was like till I *had* been away? One never knows what people really are till one's lived with them. . . . Look here, Sibylla, you simply must let me stay here for a day or two. *I* can sleep on the sofa tonight if you're so keen on giving that girl the best of everything, and then move into the spare-room to-morrow."

"But I can't. . . . I mean, it would be too much for Minnie to have a visitor for any length of time. Besides, tonight"—her misery grew—"it's just the night I can't possibly have you, with Joyce here."

"You mean that because you have a girl to stay with you whom you'd never seen two years ago, you'll turn out your old friend whom you've known fifty years? Really, Sibylla, I'm disappointed in you. We've been together nearly all our lives, since we were girls, and I thought you were the one person I could turn to in my hour of need."

"If only you'd let me know beforehand—"

"What difference would it have made? You wouldn't have put off Joyce for me. Besides, I wasn't bombed till yesterday. That was the last straw. I tell you, Sibylla, I'm a refugee and I come to you asking you to take me in, and you refuse. . . . I'm really surprised at you."

"But, Violet, you haven't given me a chance—arriving suddenly like this—taking me quite by surprise—and on such a hot day, too."

"How could I know it was going to be a hot day? It was cold enough at four o'clock this morning."

"You must have been mad to start so early."

"Ho! mad, am I? Well, perhaps my sufferings *have* affected my mind . . . it would be astonishing if they hadn't. A whole month I've been in that dreadful place. And now I come here, to find myself ~~ap-~~planted."

"Please don't talk like that."

"How else am I to talk? I *am* supplanted. It isn't as if I'd asked you to put me up for a month. I only want to stay here till I can get the house open and find a maid."

"That may mean for ever. There aren't any maids in Marlingate. If only you'd written first I'd have told you there was no use coming back."

"Than what am I to do?"

"I don't know."

"And you don't care."

Two very angry old ladies, they faced each other, hot, flustered and indignant. It was their first moment of silence and in it they heard the front door open.

"It's Joyce!" cried Sibylla, and ran out of the room.

She was in that moment less like a mother running to her daughter than a child running to its mother, expecting to be comforted, to have its fears assuaged and its life set in order. Sibylla expected all this of Joyce Yeoveney (now the prettiest little corporal that ever wore her hair rolled at off-the-collar length), and she was not disappointed.

"Oh, but that'll be quite all right, Miss Landless—how do you do, Miss Faircloth? I was just telling Miss Landless that Mrs. Arbuckle has opened ever such a nice guest-house in Pelham Square. It's especially for people who are bombed out or who have had to give up their homes. Miss Landless says you are looking for somewhere to go till you can open your house in Rye Lane."

"I was hoping Miss Landless could put me up here; but as she doesn't seem able—" She withered Sibylla with a glance. "Did you say the house is in Pelham Square?"

"Yes, Miss Faircloth. Number Forty-two."

"We used to live at Number Forty-nine. My poor mother would turn in her grave if she knew that a house in Pelham Square had become a guest-house."

"I'm told it's ever such a nice place."

"Who is this Mrs. What's-her-name?"

"She used to have 'Wave Crest' on the Parade, you know. But after Dunkirk she gave it up and didn't really mean to reopen anywhere till she found so many people in the town wanted somewhere to stay people who've lost their homes one way or another; and since

the evacuation she's had a lot of business gentlemen whose wives and families have left. . . . Mr. Grope is there and Mr. Collington, and they say they're ever so comfortable."

This glimpse of the Marlingate underworld was not reassuring, but Sibylla saw, rather to her surprise, that Violet had begun to waver.

"Who else is staying there?—do you know?"

"Well, Mr. Grope did say when he wrote to Mother that they were expecting the Reverend and Mrs. Carter from All Hallows'—they've lost all their windows, you know, and the house isn't safe because it has a crack in it, but they've got to be somewhere near the church."

This was a good move, for though Violet despised the clergy as the representatives of Organized Religion, they also stood in her mind for respectability and breeding.

"Has this Mrs.—er—who-ever-it-is got the whole house as a guest-house or only part of it?"

"Oh, she's got the whole, and she's done it all up too. They were painting and papering it when I was here last, and it really must look lovely now. She needs the whole of it, because I don't think there's any other place in Marlingate where people can stay—except rooms."

"I must say I should like to find myself in Pelham Square again."

"It would be nice and convenient for your own house—much nearer than you would be here. You could see to things better from there."

"That won't be easy—without help. I suppose you don't know of a good maid."

"We-ell," even Joyce's ready providence was cornered for a moment, "when I see Mother I might find out if Mrs. Harry Lewnes is still wanting to get back to Marlingate. She was talking of it, Mother said, a short while ago, because she wants to be near her son who's a policeman. But she'd have to find a job nearby to keep herself, and her house has been bombed."

"Then I take it she'd be willing to live in. Can she cook?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Faircloth—quite well, I believe."

"Then I think the best thing to do is for you to make enquiries, and I can stay at this place till I hear from you. Has Mrs. What's-her-name any maids?"

"Oh, yes—she's got the two she used to have at 'Wave Crest,' and Mrs. Penty comes in to help."

"One of them might come to me if I can't get Mrs. Lewnes. They might prefer private service, and I'm willing to pay high wages."

Joyce said nothing, and Sibylla thought what a silly old woman Violet was.

"Suppose," she said, "we go round and have a look at the place."

"We'd better ring up first," said Joyce. "They mayn't have an empty room."

This clinched the matter with Violet.

"Oh, surely they can put me in somewhere—a war refugee. You'd better ring, Miss Yeoveney, as you seem to know this Mrs.—er—and tell them I've been bombed out and have been travelling ever since four o'clock this morning."

The call was made and the Pelham Guest House announced that it had a nice single room on the first floor that happened to be free through an almost miraculous combination of improbable events. It was immediately settled that they should go and look at it, and if it proved suitable Joyce would carry round Violet's suit-case after lunch. In her soaring relief, Sibylla had actually asked Violet to share the roast chicken and the plum tart (having reserved the peaches for supper).

"But first," she said to Joyce, "I'll show you your room—and you've something to tell me, haven't you, dear?" she added, as soon as she had shut the door.

"Yes, and something to show you, Miss Landless," said Joyce. "I've had such a difficulty to keep it hidden while we were in there with Miss Faircloth. But I wanted you to see it before anybody else."

She held out her left hand, on the third finger of which was a ring with a tiny sapphire. It was just as Sibylla had expected, but delight filled her heart all the same.

"Oh, my dear, how lovely! Who is he?"

"His name's Bill," said Joyce, colouring prettily—"Bill Middleton, and he's at an airdrome just a few miles from our camp. We met up there."

"And when are you to be married?"

"Oh, I don't know yet." Joyce giggled. "We've only been engaged a fortnight and he doesn't know where he'll be sent. I wish he could have got his leave the same time as me, but it couldn't be managed."

"How old is he, dear?"

"Twenty-eight. That's a bit older than me, but I don't think it matters."

"No indeed. I think twenty-eight and twenty-two go very well together. Oh, my dear, how happy you must be, and—and—I'm so happy too! It's been worth it all to see you happy like this."

She suddenly felt as if she was going to cry. Joyce threw herself into her arms, and as she hugged her Sibylla felt as if she had tasted every joy in life that she had missed.

"Sibylla, *do* come." Violet's voice clamoured suddenly from the stairs. "If we're late, she may give the room to someone else."

"We can have a long talk about it this evening, dear. But let me have another look at your ring."

Joyce held it out. It was only a cheap little ring, but they both gazed at it in ecstasy.

"A sapphire—I do think that's pretty."

"He could have got me a ruby one for the same money, but we both liked that better."

"Yes, I do too. I've always liked sapphires and it reminds me of when I was your age, dear, and had the Lady Saphir's part in *Patience*. You remember—I've told you how we all did *Patience* for the Soldiers' Families Fund in the South African War?" Still moved by this mysterious power of another's happiness, she began to sing:

*I hear the soft note of the echoing voice  
Of an old, old love, long dead—  
It whispers my sorrowing heart "rejoice"—  
For the last sad tear is shed.  
The pain that is all but a pleasure will change  
For the pleasure that's all but pain.  
And never, oh never, this heart will range  
From that old, old love again!  
Yes, the pain that is all but a pleasure—*

"Sibylla, *do* come! What are you doing?"

Violet had burst into the room, but Sibylla still felt too happy to be angry with her.

"You ought to know," she said gaily. "I was singing our song from the Finale in Act One."

"What song?—what Finale? What *are* you talking about?"

"The song in *Patience*. You had the contralto part—don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, I remember now, but I should never have recognized it. *Do come along.*"

Number Forty-two Pelham Square was visited, its fallen state deplored but its hospitality gladly secured at four guineas a week. The room was really quite a good one, as war conditions had not made it possible to cut the vast spaces into more convenient shape.

"I might fancy myself at home—in the dressing-room of Mother's bedroom, where I slept for a fortnight, you remember, Sibylla, when the Nurse was away. This room corresponds exactly to that—except that it's on the opposite side of the house, being an even number."

Sibylla was both relieved and grateful to have her disposed of so easily and hoped that the charm would not wear off before the house in Rye Lane was ready for occupation. Violet had already become a little critical by the time they started for home.

"Of course there's no hot and cold water laid on, which is rather a drawback. One doesn't exactly expect an old-fashioned jug and basin at four guineas a week."

"Well, she couldn't get anything put in, Miss Faircloth," said Joyce, "because of the war and the evacuation—there wasn't a plumber to be had. But she got the whole place papered and painted, and I do think it looks nice."

"It looks fresh and clean, certainly. By the way, I never looked into the lavatory. I think I ought to see that before I go there."

"But it's all settled—you've taken the room, Violet—it's all fixed. There's no object in seeing the lavatory."

"I really ought to see it—you know how particular I am."

"It's a beautiful lavatory, Miss Faircloth—all painted white, with a blue and white check paper and blue lino on the floor. There are three lavatories altogether, counting the gentlemen's cloakroom on the ground-floor."

"Yes, we had three at Number Forty-nine. There ought to be one on the floor above my room, at the bend of the stairs."

"That's just where it is, Miss Faircloth."

"Then perhaps I needn't go back and look at it after all. What are you staring at, Sibylla?"

"I thought I heard a 'plane."

They were at the corner of Pelham Terrace and Rye Lane, looking out over the trees of the Town Park to Marlingate's back-drop of sea. Suddenly out of the roll of haze that hid the greater distances swept a small black object, growing in size and sound.

"It's a German," cried Violet, grabbing Sibylla's arm.

"Well, we're nearly home. Do control yourself, Violet. You're hurting me."

"We ought to take cover. I thought they were building an air-raid shelter at the corner of Pelham Terrace. Why isn't it there?"

"I don't think they've started it yet. But it doesn't matter. Don't make a fuss. Let's get home as quickly as possible."

"We shan't be any safer there than here?"

"Oh yes, we shall. Come on, Joyce, dear—let's hurry."

They all three stepped out more briskly as the siren on the roof of the Town Hall opened its deep throat. The 'plane swung low and made a circle over the Old Town below them.

"He may not drop anything," said Joyce. "He may be just a recko, taking photographs."

Sibylla looked up at the wheeling plane and shook her head.

"Wouldn't it be better if we popped in somewhere?" said Violet. "The people in these houses surely wouldn't refuse to give us shelter."

"They're all empty," panted Sibylla. "Shut up and empty from here to Monypenny Crescent. Let's get home."

The 'plane had finished its circle over the Old Town and had begun to make a wider one. They could hear the roar of its engines over their heads. Only a short distance away the palladian frontage of Monypenny Crescent gleamed in the sunshine. Home and safety smiled at them; then the 'plane's shadow passed over the whiteness like the shadow of an evil bird.

"I can see his swastika," said Sibylla hoarsely.

"Don't take any notice of him," said Violet, just as she had said when some years ago a wicked man had made a rude gesture at them in Rye Lane.

They hurried on, the three of them, the two old ladies and the pretty little corporal—Sibylla frightened and flustered, Violet frightened and furious, little Joyce stout-hearted but anxious about her charges, uncertain what to do for the best and aware of her own inexperience, for such emergencies were very much more common in Marlingate than in Blackpool.

The 'plane had taken another swing, and the town beneath it was as silent as if all the inhabitants were already dead. Such few cars as were in the streets had been parked beside the kerb while their owners took cover, and the High Street 'bus stood motionless and empty at its starting-place by the ruins of the French Gun. The only sounds to be heard were the droning of the 'plane and the patter of their own footsteps on the pavement.

As they turned into Monypenny Crescent a policeman appeared—the only figure in all that sunny emptiness. He came towards them shouting something which they could not hear. Then suddenly a loud and hideous chatter burst out over their heads.

"What's that?" screamed Violet.

"He's machine-gunning," puffed Sibylla. "Hurry up and we'll be home before the bombs fall." Somehow a machine-gun was not nearly so terrifying as a bomb.

They could hear the policeman calling:

"Lie down! Lie down at once."

"Miss Landless . . ." panted Joyce, tugging at her coat, but Sibylla ran blindly on. She was nearly home—within a few yards of comfort and safety. If only she could get there while the enemy was still comparatively innocently occupied with his machine-gun. She looked over her shoulder and saw that Joyce was following, while Violet lurched in the rear. Somebody (herself or Violet—she was not clear which) said, "Be quick or that policeman will catch you and throw you down." Run, run, run, run—never had she run so fast. A noise in her ears like an express train . . . was it the noise of her running? —or the noise of the plane? . . . Then suddenly she realized that she was lying down—flat on the pavement—dear little Joyce beside her—and machine-gun bullets were dancing and spattering round them like hail. What had happened? Had the policeman thrown her down? It was queer that she could not remember what had happened. She felt stunned and shaken, as if someone had struck her a blow . . . what a pity people were so rough! . . . what a pity it was raining so hard! She would be wet through before she could get to the High Street 'bus . . . her new coat and skirt, too—green, with green and gold braid on the collar . . . She looked very smart in it, with her hair done in that new pompadour style. . . . Well, she mustn't stay any longer here, interesting as it was. She must start at once for the 'bus. She had a feeling that someone was waiting for her.

That year's perfect summer had lingered on long after its official end. On the first day of October the Marine Parade lay simmering in a warmth that was only a little less intense than the warmth of July. From Cuckoo Hill to All Holland Hill the empty beaches drank up the sunshine; but between them and any who might have yielded to their golden, spacious lure stretched a rampart of barbed wire and iron stages. The few saunterers on the Parade could view their forbidden playground only from the town side of the carriage-way. The sea side was a fortress.

After the brilliance outside, the interior of Brown's shop seemed dismal indeed. The windows were covered with boards and felting, and when Kitty had asked for the light to be turned on she had been told that they did not put on the lights for less than half a dozen customers.

"And we're only five," said Georgie.

"Well, we must hope someone else will soon come in," said Myra.

"It's only half-past twelve," said Kitty. "Early for lunch. So I expect we shall have to finish ours in the dark."

Mrs. Brown was not there, or she would probably have made an exception in favour of customers she knew so well—Mrs. Lintine and Mrs. Hardcastle and Mrs. Street, who used to come into the shop for ices when she and they were little girls, Mr. Street, who had married one of them, and the Reverend Mr. Hardcastle, who had married another and used to be the Rector of her parish church. The three women wore black, but only Kitty looked as if her clothes were anything but a makeshift. Myra and Georgie had evidently searched their lumber-rooms for funeral wear, whereas Kitty normally wore black on her frequent visits to town and appeared today as she might have appeared in Bond Street.

"I'm simply stewing," said Georgie, "but I couldn't find a blouse that was even white, so I had to put on a sweater."

"This is the last time I wear mourning for anybody," said Myra. "If either of you has a funeral, you'll have to put up with me in colours."

Georgie looked shocked.

"I was surprised to see such a lot of people," she said, "considering the town is evacuated."

"I think a number have come back," said Toby, "and of course

your sister was very well known—she'd lived in Marlingate nearly all her life."

"And the girl knew a lot of people too," said Myra, "of a different sort."

"I wish I could have had a word with her mother and aunts," said Tom Hardcastle. "I'd meant to, but some old parishioners stopped me on the way and they'd disappeared before I could get near them."

"I believe they had to catch a train back to Somersetshire or Wiltshire or somewhere. Her fiancé disappeared too. That was her fiancé, wasn't it—the tall airman?"

"Yes—poor fellow!"

"He's the one I'm sorriest for," said Kitty.

"Lord," said Myra, "how he must hate Sibylla!"

"Poor old Sib—I hope not," said Georgie.

"I don't see how he can help it, considering that but for her his girl would still be alive. If Sibylla hadn't stayed on in the town when she ought to have left it, Joyce Yeovency would never have come to visit her here."

Tom Hardcastle shook his head—by this time a distinguished white one.

"You can't argue that way, Myra—going back and back. Or rather once you start going back you must go back to the beginning. If your father and mother hadn't settled in Marlingate . . ."

"I don't go back any further," said Kitty, "than five minutes before it all happened. If when they'd first seen the 'plane they'd doubled back to the house they'd just left in Pelham Square they'd have been perfectly all right. But I suppose Sibylla would go on home."

"That's what Violet Faircloth said," said Myra. "She was full of some grievance about not having been allowed to go back and visit the lavatory at this place. She seemed to think that if she'd done that they'd all have escaped."

"They probably would," said Toby. "There wasn't a bomb or a bullet in Pelham Square. I'm sorry for Violet."

"So am I," said Myra. "But I still don't like her."

"Have you seen much of her," asked Georgie, "since it happened?"

"No—only once. She's still too badly shocked to have visitors. A brother's been sent for, but he hasn't arrived yet."

"Do they think she'll recover?"

"They do; but she'll always be a cripple, I'm afraid. Her pelvis

is smashed and you don't get over that sort of thing at her age. I suppose the brother will look after her."

"She's got plenty of money—that's one comfort."

Kitty buzzed the bell that stood on the table.

"I wish they'd bring our order. I don't want to miss that train."

"Brown's isn't what it was," said Tom with a wry smile.

"How can it be?" asked Myra. "I wonder these shops keep going at all. I suppose the Town Council leans lightly on the rates."

"Then how does the town pay its way?"

"I don't suppose it does. But I believe there are Government subsidies for these evacuated places."

"Do you remember in the old days," said Georgie, "Brown's always used to have ribbon bows on the sugar-tongs, like Fuller's? I suppose they don't do that now."

"It would be a mockery with one lump of sugar."

"Here comes our lunch," said Kitty—"such as it is."

Georgie sighed.

"When you think of what Marlingate used to be like in the old days, it really is heartrending to see it now—all deserted and with so many houses in ruins."

"The damage isn't nearly so bad as I expected," said Kitty, "from Sibylla's account. For one thing, they've had only high-explosive here. It's the fire-bombs that have given London its charnel air."

"But at least there are people in London. There are none here. Look at all those empty tables."

A shadow fell across the door, a shadow that seemed to cast light before it, for immediately the electric light went on to greet the sixth customer.

Georgie whispered, "It's the airman fiancé."

The tall airman slouched past the counter towards the luncheon-tables. He had about twenty to choose from.

"We must do something about him," said Kitty. "Let's ask him to join us here."

"I don't suppose he wants to join us," said Myra. "He must hate us almost as much as he hates Sibylla."

"Why should he? Besides, if we speak to him we can explain how it was we failed to get her away. Anyhow, we can't leave him to mope by himself. I'll go and speak to him."

"Tom had better go," said Georgie, but Kitty had already risen.

Certainly of the three sisters she was the most likely to charm an unhappy man. Besides being the only one who did not wear clumsy, improvised mourning, she had in her slight figure still some of the grace of youth, and her face, carefully and suitably made up under her beautiful white hair, was the face of a woman ten years younger than her age.

Certainly the airman did not seem to resent her interference. They saw his face light up as she spoke to him, and with apparent readiness he came across to their table.

"Do join us," said Myra.

Tom Hardcastle pulled out a chair.

"Yes, indeed—sit here. I tried to get a word with you after the funeral, but you had disappeared."

"Mrs. Yeoveney and her sisters had to dash for the train and I went with them to the station; but there isn't a train for London till nearly two."

"No—that's the one I'm going by," said Kitty. "There's plenty of time to eat first. But I'm afraid you can't get much except this rather dismal stuff we're having—Hungarian goulasch on the menu, stew on the plate."

"That'll suit me fine." He gave his order to the waitress. "I understand this is the only place in the town where one can get a meal. I tried one or two of the pubs, but they had only snacks, and I'm hungry—I've been travelling since ten o'clock last night."

The others murmured sympathetically.

"I'm afraid they haven't a licence here," said Toby. "Only soft drinks."

"Oh, I've had a drink or two . . ." He looked round the empty place, his mouth working restlessly, his hands opening and shutting between his knees. "But the trouble with me is what I said—I'm hungry."

"You've had a long journey," said Georgie.

"All the way from beyond Blackpool. They gave me forty-eight hours' compassionate to go to the funeral. If I could have got away at the same time as my poor Jo I shouldn't be leaving her here."

There was an awkward silence. No one knew if he wanted to talk about Joyce or not.

"We all feel for you very deeply," said Tom Hardcastle.

"If I'd had my leave when I wanted it," he continued, staring over

their heads at the dummy wedding-cake on its throne behind the counter, where it had been removed from the shattered window, "I'd have taken her straight down to Somerset. I wouldn't have let her come here where she didn't belong any more and had no call to visit."

"I agree with you," said Myra, a lump in her throat, "but she came of her natural kindness and goodness to visit my poor sister. I never met your fiancée, but I know how good she was to Sibylla and how Sibylla loved her. And I want to say," she cleared her throat and went on—"I want to say how sorry I am that her kindness should have led to this and to tell you that we—my sisters and I—did everything possible to make Sibylla leave Marlingate, but just couldn't move her."

"I must have written to her at least a dozen times," said Georgie, "asking her to come to my husband and me at Chessington."

"Oh, I'm not blaming or criticizing any of you," said the airman, "but it does seem hard that a girl like my poor Jo should have to die because a silly old trout—I beg your pardon, ladies and gentlemen—should insist on living in a front-line town. And the more I see of Marlingate," he added as his plateful of hash was set down before him, "the more I'm surprised."

"She'd lived here nearly all her life," said Myra, "and she was very fond of her home. She never would leave it to stay with any of us, even before the war. And I believe too that she thought it would be cowardly to run away. Our father was a Colonel and she seemed to think that obliged her to remain at her 'post,' as she called it, though heaven knows what she thought she was doing there."

"All the same it seems hard! . . . Oh, I know what these old people are like, you can't move them once they get ideas. I had an old aunt took an idea she had appendicitis and nothing the doctor or anybody could say would prevent her stopping in bed for twenty years till she died. All the same it seems hard! . . ."

His dark eyes still glared resentfully into the middle-distance, where Brown's primordial wedding-cake lifted its white mockery of cardboard and silver paper. Nobody spoke, even when a faintly syncopated drone wove itself into the silence.

"Sounds like a Jerry," said the airman after a while.

"I expect it is," said Myra. "They come over two or three times a week."

The siren lifted its bull-bellow and Georgie looked alarmed. She and her husband were the only members of the party who had no

experience of bombs, for Kitty had spent a night in London on her way down from Shropshire, and was in consequence inclined to look down on provincial blitzes.

The bombs fell—a stick of five in some distant part of the town.

“Sounds like the Totty Lands,” said the waitress; “they’ve been there mostly these last few times.”

“I suppose they’re after the waterworks,” said Myra.

“They must be very small bombs,” said Kitty, “to make no more noise than that.”

“What I can’t understand,” said Georgie, whose voice was shaking in spite of her efforts to control it amidst so much calm—“what I can’t understand is why the Germans should bomb a harmless, unimportant place like this. There can’t be any aerodromes or military objectives within miles.”

“Practice,” said the airman. “That’s what I make out it is. They’ve got to get practice somewhere, and I guess they think it’s a good idea to try themselves out on some place over here where there isn’t any flak.”

“Poor Marlingate,” said Myra, “to be bombed only as practice for some worthier target!”

“Well, I don’t know for certain, of course, but it’s what it looks like to me. The chap up there has come over with his instructor; he’s got his instructor with him in the ’plane, and the instructor says, ‘Here’s the town and there’s the railway station—or the waterworks—or the gasworks—you make a pot at it.’ And the chap lets fly and hits a private house or a church or a hospital.”

“And what about the machine-gunning?”

“Pure viciousness, if you ask me. But I may be wrong—it may be practice too.”

Kitty said, “I hope we do the same their side of the Channel.”

“We can’t very well, because they’ve got flak in all but the very small places, and we don’t want to beat up the French.”

There was another silence in their awkward little party. Toby looked at his watch.

“If anyone’s going to catch the one-fifty train . . .”

“Yes,” said Kitty, standing up; “we ought to be going.”

The airman stood up too. He looked pleased, and Myra guessed that he was pleased to be travelling up to London with Kitty. Would she, when she was sixty, she wondered, find young men displaying

pleasure at the thought of travelling up to town with her? It was doubtful.

Toby said, "I'll run you up to the station. It won't take more than ten minutes. The rest of you had better wait here."

But the Hardcastles, who were coming back to Pyramus for the night, were very anxious to visit some old parishioners of Tom's on the Coney Banks.

"Perhaps you could call for us there after you've picked up Myra . . ."

It ended in all five of them driving off together, while Myra went for a stroll in the Marine Gardens. Toby would find her there when he had deposited the Hardcastles and done some business at Parker's, the seed and potato merchants in High Street. They were apologetic about leaving her, but there was no room for a sixth in the car with all the luggage.

Actually she was not sorry to be alone for a few minutes. The last few days had been hectic with police, lawyers and relations. She had done very much more talking than thinking and would be glad of a little quiet—which the Marine Gardens were well qualified to provide, being entirely empty. They had, however, few other attractions. Myra had never found them enticing, but at least they had offered the refreshment of green lawns and flowers, whereas now their only produce seemed to be cabbages and barbed wire. The bandstand had been damaged by blast and stood at a raffish angle, while a concrete pill-box blocked the sea out of her view from the little arbour of tamarisks where she found one of the few remaining seats.

She had, however, a free view of the sky, as luminously clear as in the morning, but now with its pure blue scrawled over with the chalky arabesques of sky warfare. They coiled and looped over its inviolable deeps, telling of the cold airs of winter piled above the lingering summer of the earth and of the greater heights attainable by the climbing 'planes. These were now invisible, only their paths could be traced in snowy condensations, and even those paths no longer showed their positions, as the land-wind took them out to sea, away from the battle which she could hear droning faintly in the north. How changed it all was, though only seven weeks later, from those aggressive formations roaring confidently in at only a few thousand

feet! . . . Over her head, almost without her knowing it, a battle had been won.

She had seen that battle mainly in its shadow cast upon the earth—in its effect on farm and field, in its jetsam of bombs and damaged 'planes. Only the newspaper reports of the number of these and of the enemy's constant change of tactics had proclaimed the wider issues. She had not seen the wood because of the many, many trees. But now she was out of the wood, and could look back on it lying there behind her. Not only she but the whole country could look back and see what they had escaped from.

Of course the 'planes still came to London and the big cities by night, but in sheer terrorism, no longer as part of a well-ordered plan. That plan was broken, shattered with Goliath's forehead. . . . She wondered what new plan would succeed it. Where would Hitler strike next? Would he make another attempt on the British Isles or would he turn his back contemptuously on what he could not subdue and create a new Europe in his own image? . . . She shuddered. Her country was still alone, with little comfort except for the divided friendship of the United States, and the war seemed to stretch endlessly ahead, since it seemed impossible that Britain alone, though able to defend her own soil, should be able to dislodge the colossus that straddled the rest of the earth.

The day was turning cold; autumn at last had shown itself in a swift decline from noon. A little breeze had sprung off the sea and shook the tamarisks. She left her seat and began to walk about. She hoped Toby would not be much longer, though she could not trust him not to linger with a firm of agricultural providers.

Toby . . . there at least, in that one spot, occupied by a man's two feet, her world stood firm. Even the whirlwind that she had sprung on him had been unable to uproot Toby. Through all her changes he had been there, the same. She had been two different women and hoped to be a third, but he had been one man only—a man like a tree, rooted in its own soil, growing and strengthening without parting unrecognizably from its self of years ago.

Was it because of him, she wondered, that all her symbols lately had been trees?—her marriage topped but not uprooted, her battle-experience an escape from a thick wood. . . . Men as trees . . . a husband like a tree . . . it might sound dull to some, but there was a quality in trees that she found infinitely reassuring, a quality of

growth in fixedness which is a quality of the earth itself, a quality that she herself lacked. . . . What would have become of her if it had also been lacking in him?

She wished he would come now, and gave herself the relaxation of feeling cross with him. He might have realized that she would be cold in this freshening wind, that she would be bored by an indefinite wait in these dismal gardens—in this inexpressibly dismal town. She suddenly felt an intense desire to be out of Marlingate. Thank goodness that she would not have to come here often in future. Once the house in Monypenny Crescent was disposed of and Sibylla's affairs settled up, there would be nothing for her to come for. She knew practically nobody in the place and she had long ceased to have time or energy for shopping. She had never liked Marlingate and now she liked it less than ever. What on earth, she wondered, had made Sibylla so deeply attached to it?

She knew that her own dislike was based on the fact that it had always stood in her mind for confinement, stiffness and repression. But what else had it ever stood for to Sibylla? All but the last years of her sister's life must have been spent under conditions infinitely worse than any she, Myra, had fled from. Yet apparently she had loved it, and of recent times at least had been happy there. Did the explanation lie in the fact that Sibylla, with the conscience of another age, had accepted her prison so that in the end it had become a home? Sibylla had not struggled to escape—she had not trampled on other lives in order to get free. . . . Or had she struggled?—had she ever planned an escape of which Myra had never heard?—planned and failed or planned and renounced? . . . After all, she knew very little about Sibylla, who had belonged almost to another generation. Grown-up when Myra was born, she had always been more like an aunt than a sister. It was impossible to feel the grief for her that one should feel for a sister. . . . Poor old thing—poor old Sibylla! . . . In her drabness, in her provincialism, in her primness and respectability, in her embodiment of a bygone age, and finally in her end as the victim of a new one, Sibylla was remarkably like Marlingate. . . . Poor Marlingate! To see it now was to see a respectable elderly lady being beaten up by thugs. . . . Oh, why didn't Toby come and take her out?

She heard a car hoot at the corner of High Street. There he was at last—she recognized his crackpot horn, and no one but Toby would

























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